HER MAJESTY’S GOVERNMENT

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

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27 November 2017
Mr Speaker: I should like to make a short statement following the announcement from Clarence House today of the engagement of Prince Harry to Meghan Markle. I am sure that Members from both sides of the House will join me in congratulating the couple on this most happy occasion and wishing them all the very best for their future together.

Oral Answers to Questions

DEFENCE

The Secretary of State was asked—

NATO North Atlantic Command

1. Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What discussions he has had with his counterparts in other NATO member states on the location of the new NATO North Atlantic Command. [902547]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): I thank the Secretary of State for that answer, but with Russian submarine activity in Scottish waters at a level not seen since the cold war—just last week, the Russian destroyer the Vice-Admiral Kulakov was escorted through the Moray firth—how can the Secretary of State reassure Scots that, when the command is re-established, it will meet the needs of Scotland, which sits in a vital strategic position with respect to the High North?

Gavin Newlands: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer, but with Russian submarine activity in Scottish waters at a level not seen since the cold war—just last week, the Russian destroyer the Vice-Admiral Kulakov was escorted through the Moray firth—how can the Secretary of State reassure Scots that, when the command is re-established, it will meet the needs of Scotland, which sits in a vital strategic position with respect to the High North?

Gavin Williamson: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the increased activity of Russian submarines in the north Atlantic. I am sure he would welcome the investment that the UK Government are putting into Her Majesty’s naval base at Clyde. Some £1.5 billion is being spent on investing in Scotland and 6,500 personnel are already based at Her Majesty’s naval base at Clyde, and that number is going to increase. NATO and what we do in terms of NATO are vital. It is the cornerstone of our defence. The hon. Gentleman must understand, though, that it is about not only conventional warfare and conventional deterrents but a nuclear deterrent. If we do not recognise the fact that nuclear weapons have been safeguarding our security, then we do not understand what NATO is. I very much hope that the hon. Gentleman will start to welcome our investment in not only conventional submarines in Scotland but nuclear submarines.
Bambos Charalambous: In a recent letter to the Defence Secretary, 25 of his Conservative colleagues said:

“We look forward to rhetoric being matched in deeds over the coming months.”

Will the Secretary of State listen to colleagues from all parts of the House and match the Government’s rhetoric with increased resources for our armed services?

Gavin Williamson: What we have in our national security and capability review is the opportunity to step back, look at the threats and challenges that face this country, whether it is from cyber or from more conventional threats, and make sure that we have the right resources in place to deliver for our armed forces. That is what I will be looking at. I am looking forward to meeting the Chancellor as well as many others and having those discussions going forward.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I warmly congratulate my right hon. Friend on taking up office in this vital position. When he speaks to the Chancellor, will he take the opportunity of reminding him that, in the cold war years, we spent 5% of GDP on defence and that now we spend barely 2% of GDP on defence? Perhaps a target nearer to 3% of GDP on defence might prevent our armed forces from being further hollowed out.

Gavin Williamson: I will always listen intensely and very carefully to the arguments of my right hon. Friend. I have always seen 2% as a base as opposed to a ceiling, and I will certainly take on board his thoughts and comments in discussions going forward.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I welcome the right hon. Gentleman to his new post and to the world of defence. The National Audit Office report earlier this year highlighted the fact that the Government have committed £24.4 billion to extra equipment, but only another £6.4 billion was actually there in new money for the joint strike fighter. How will he fill that £18 billion black hole in the budget on the basis that both the efficiencies and the headroom identified by the NAO have not yet been met?

Gavin Williamson: We have an unparalleled commitment from this Government to continue to increase defence spending on equipment—0.5% above inflation every single year. I will be very happy to look at all the issues in the National Audit Office report and make sure that, working with our industrial partners, we deliver very best value for our armed forces.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend, my constituency neighbour to his place. Training is key to ensuring that our armed forces are operationally ready should they need to be mobilised. Will my right hon. Friend outline what measures are being taken to ensure that training is well funded?

Gavin Williamson: We have often been criticised for having the most poorly equipped armed forces, but the best trained armed forces. In my tenure as Secretary of State, I want to ensure that we have armed forces that...
have the best equipment and the best training. I have spoken to ministerial colleagues from Norway and other countries across Europe, and they all recognise our commitment to training. We will continue to invest in that, including in what the Royal Marines do in Norway every single winter.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State to his place, and echo his good wishes—and yours, Mr Speaker—to His Royal Highness Prince Harry and Meghan on their engagement.

Security cannot be done on the cheap. With expert after expert highlighting serious gaps in defence funding, it was surreal last week to hear the permanent secretary say that the man in charge had made no formal pre-Budget requests to the Chancellor for more money. It is one thing to ask and not get, but another not even to bother asking. Did I hear correctly today? Will the Secretary of State confirm that he actually did not make any representations to the Chancellor before the Budget?

Gavin Williamson: We have to ensure that we understand the needs of our defence and armed forces. The hon. Lady may wish to rush into things, and to demand and demand, but I want to ensure that we have the arguments ready, we understand the threats that this country faces and we deliver for our armed forces. That is what the focus will be. I have had many conversations with the Chancellor, and I look forward to having many more.

Nia Griffith: I think I will take that as a no. This is serious; we hear that the Marines may be cut by 15% and the Army reduced to 70,000. That would seriously put our international credibility at risk. With the Secretary of State’s Back Benchers in open rebellion and one of his Ministers threatening to quit over cuts, just how bad do things have to get before the Secretary of State does his job, stands up for defence, and tells the Prime Minister and the Chancellor that enough is enough?

Gavin Williamson: I will take many lectures from many people, but it is a little bit rich to be lectured about defence spending by the party that is led by a man who does not even believe in the British Army or a continuous at-sea nuclear deterrent. The Conservative party is the party that is ensuring that we deliver on the needs of our defence and armed forces. That is what the focus will be. I have had many conversations with the Chancellor, and I look forward to having many more.

Cadet Units: State Schools

John Howell: The sea cadet corps in Henley has provided the youngest of my daughters with enormous opportunities for personal development. Does the Minister agree that it is important to support cadet units in state schools, particularly with things such as uniforms?

Mr Ellwood: I am happy to agree with my hon. Friend. He is right that cadet units provide life skills, employability and social mobility—things that schools do not necessarily offer themselves. I also pay tribute to the work of the cadets who participated in Remembrance Sunday up and down the country.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Last week, I was able to see Scunthorpe’s 119 Squadron, which meets outside the school day, but does fantastic work developing young people. The young people and the volunteers are a real tribute to us all. What are the Government doing to ensure that cadet groups—Army, Navy and sea—continue to play an important role in our communities?

Mr Ellwood: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on visiting his local cadet unit, and I encourage other hon. Members across the House to support our cadet programmes when they are in their constituencies. I mentioned the cadet expansion programme: there are 126,000 cadets supporting by 28,000 volunteers, and we are very grateful to them.

20. [902568] Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Given the findings of the recently published report by my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), does my hon. Friend agree that schemes such as the combined cadet force at Westcliff High School for Boys are an excellent way to boost recruitment in the armed forces? Perhaps he will also encourage other schools to adopt the programme.

Mr Ellwood: I also pay tribute to my right hon. Friend’s work on understanding the challenges we face with recruitment and retention. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that, as a starting point, the cadet programme is important to encourage and open up opportunities in the armed forces. Some 20% of those who sign up for the cadets go on to become members of our armed forces, and the other 80% have an affinity and an understanding for them, and a desire to support them, which is also welcome.1

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The combined cadet force at Treorchy Comprehensive has been going for 10 years now, and it has done a brilliant job. Lots of young people have been given skills and opportunities they would never otherwise have had, and the same goes for the sea cadets in Llwynnypia. However, one of the daftest things the MOD did last year was to sell the Pentre barracks for a paltry sum. We now really need a venue for the sea cadets and the combined cadet force to be able to work together. Would the Minister like to visit the Rhondda very soon—he may have some spare time in the near future—to look at the combined cadet force and the sea cadets?

Mr Ellwood: I am not sure how useful I would be if I did have spare time in the future. There is an armed forces rationalisation programme of real estate in the UK. Some 2% of the land is owned by the Ministry of Employment.

1. ([Official Report, 5 December 2017, Vol. 632, c. 6MC])
Defence and we are going through a process to rationalise that. That may include some locations that the hon. Gentleman mentions, but because of the contribution the cadets make to wider society and the armed forces, we absolutely need to work with local authorities and Members of Parliament to make sure cadets have a place to go.

Queen Elizabeth Aircraft Carrier

4. Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): What progress he has made on bringing the Queen Elizabeth class aircraft carrier into service. [902550]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Harriett Baldwin): HMS Queen Elizabeth has returned to Portsmouth after a successful second set of sea trials. Her commissioning ceremony is planned for 7 December in the presence of Her Majesty the Queen. The handover to the Royal Navy from the contractor is planned for the end of the year.

Tom Tugendhat: Does my hon. Friend agree that there is now a sense of urgency? Not only are we planning a global future for ourselves, which will require a greater presence around the world, but with the royal wedding coming as early as next year, and with the absence of the yacht Britannia, is there not a possibility that the new prince and princess will require something to sail around the seas?

Harriett Baldwin: I certainly was not anticipating that line of questioning from my hon. Friend, the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, but he is absolutely right that this new class of aircraft carrier will give a powerful expression of national ambition and intent. They are versatile and agile ships and will be able to perform a wide range of maritime security roles.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): Will the Minister confirm that the Government see the future of the Queen Elizabeth, when it comes into service, as an aircraft carrier and not as meeting defence cuts by replacing one of the £1 billion Type 45 destroyers, which have been riddled with issues, is currently at sea. Given the important role that they will play in supporting the carriers, what urgent action are the Government taking to remedy these issues?

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I gently point out to the House that although very engaging, the exchanges have been rather protracted, so progress is slow. There are lots of very important questions on the Order Paper that I am keen to reach, so let us try to speed up.

Hawk Aircraft: Overseas Promotion

5. Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for International Trade on promoting Hawk aircraft overseas. [902551]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Harriett Baldwin): The Ministry of Defence and the Department for International Trade continue to work closely with BAE Systems to promote and secure sales of the world-leading Hawk advanced jet training aircraft.

Wes Streeting: I recently had the opportunity to talk to Unite and GMB members about the importance of a consistent flow of orders to maintain jobs throughout the supply chain for Hawk. In a recent debate on defence aerospace strategy, the Minister referred to 12 Hawk aircraft for Qatar. Has this figure changed from the six initially announced? Could she update us with progress on getting further orders on the books?

Harriett Baldwin: I can absolutely confirm that the Government are working wholeheartedly in every way they can to ensure that we put that order from the Government of Qatar on the order books by the end of the year. That includes—

Wes Streeting: Is it six or 12?

Harriett Baldwin: I can write to the hon. Gentleman if there is some confusion. I thought it was six.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): How important are these iconic aircraft to supporting and promoting the soft power of a global Britain?

Harriett Baldwin: My hon. Friends and constituency neighbour will know that the Red Arrows have just returned from a very successful tour of the Gulf. Part of what they do is support the wonderful export campaigns that the company is running.
Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): There are 21 RAF officers sitting in the Gallery today who are due to be deployed on Op Shader in the new year. I am sure that the whole House wishes them well in their future deployment.

Ten days ago, we had a debate in this Chamber on a new defence industrial strategy. Given the jobs that are still vulnerable at Brough and the Qatar order that we still do not have the detail on, can we just have a defence industrial strategy, please?

Harriett Baldwin: I am happy to pay tribute to the people who are here in the Gallery today for everything that they do.

The hon. Lady is right to keep raising these issues. I can assure her that the Government are focusing very fully on both the matters that she raises.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): On the day that the Government are launching their industrial strategy, this country is in danger of losing its sovereign defence industrial capability, not least in aerospace. Will the Minister therefore be specific in telling us what efforts she is making to promote additional orders across the world?

Harriett Baldwin: Nonsense! We could not be working harder across the globe. We have not only the Department for International Trade but a fantastic network of defence attachés.

Wayne David: What are you doing?

Harriett Baldwin: I am working tirelessly on behalf of the Government, travelling around the world to support a range of different export campaigns, as is my colleague, the Secretary of State for International Trade.

Cyber-Warfare Defence

6. Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What steps he is taking to improve the UK’s cyber-defence capabilities.

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): We take cyber-attacks very seriously and are aware of the increasing threats. As part of the defence cyber programme, we are investing £265 million in a programme of cyber-vulnerability investigations for military equipment, building a new £40 million cyber-security operations centre, and ensuring that our people are fully equipped to meet the cyber challenge.

Mr Carmichael: Is the Department looking at the recent Russian activity in this sphere, especially in Ukraine and Crimea, where it is clear that cyber-warfare has gone hand in glove with conventional warfare? The initiatives that the Minister has outlined today are very welcome, but does he understand that he also has to speak to and include other Departments, commercial interests and media outlets?

Mark Lancaster: I was in Ukraine quite recently, and the right hon. Gentleman makes a powerful point. That is precisely why this has to be a cross-Government effort, and why we are spending some £1.9 billion on our national cyber-security strategy.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): My constituents in GCHQ are on the front line of the UK’s cyber-defence, and they are among the brightest and the best. Recruiting and retaining people of exceptional ability does, however, require competitive levels of pay. May I urge my right hon. Friend and the Foreign Secretary to have that very much in mind when future decisions are made?

Mark Lancaster: I was in my hon. Friend’s constituency quite recently at GCHQ, looking at the joint work that the MOD and GCHQ are carrying out together. He makes a reasonable point. That is why we are determined to invest in a career structure for cyber specialists, and we will be opening the defence cyber school at the Defence Academy at Shrivenham in January 2018.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): Tweets are cheaper than tanks, and Russia, Iran and other state and non-state actors are increasingly looking to cyber and to social media as a cheap, effective way of destabilising the west. The Foreign Secretary told this House that he had seen no evidence of Russian interference in UK elections or the referendum. Has the Minister?

Mark Lancaster: Let us be absolutely clear: there are limits on what we can discuss in this Chamber, and I think the hon. Lady will recognise that. In this age of constant competition, this country is under constant attack from both state and non-state actors, and this is a defence capability in which we are determined to continue to invest.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that a trade-off between cyber and conventional capabilities is wrong; that the MOD needs to be capable of cyber, conventional and non-conventional forms of warfare; and that further cuts to our niche and specialist capabilities will do strategic harm to this country?

Mark Lancaster: I certainly agree that this is not a binary choice. Indeed, perhaps it is more of a digital choice, as we look further on in the 21st century. That is why it is absolutely right that we are carrying out the national security and capability review, because as the threats intensify across the spectrum, we have to invest in those things.

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): I wonder whether the Minister heard BBC Radio 4’s “Profile” yesterday on Yevgeny Prigozhin, otherwise known as Putin’s chef, and his so-called troll factory in St Petersburg. If the Minister heard it, he should be very concerned indeed about Russia’s increasing efforts at cyber-warfare and the threat of disruption it poses to our democracy and the defence of the realm. What steps are he and the Department trying to take to minimise that serious Russian threat?

Mark Lancaster: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me the opportunity to say that I did not hear that profile yesterday because I was at the 100th anniversary of Cambrai—the first use of the tank—in France, and a marvellous event it was, too. He makes a reasonable point, and I can only refer him to some of the comments I have made during this question about investment and how seriously we take the threat.
Partner in Defence

7. **Jack Lopresti** (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure that the UK remains an effective defence partner. [902553]

**The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson):** The MOD works closely with our allies and partners, making a crucial contribution to Britain's status as a global power. The challenging global security context, including a resurgent Russia, makes our relationships all the more vital. In my first three weeks, I have met Defence Ministers from the US, France and other NATO members, and I will continue to engage widely.

**Jack Lopresti:** Given the current financial pressures within the MOD, does my right hon. Friend agree with Lieutenant General Ben Hodges, who was the commander of the US army in Europe and who said that Britain risks “going into a different sort of category” of ally if we cannot maintain our capability commitments?

**Gavin Williamson:** When I had the good fortune to sit down with Secretary Mattis to discuss our partnership, what struck me was the value that the United States puts on everything that Britain does, and the contribution our men and equipment make. He was left in no doubt that that commitment—that resolute support that we have always provided to the United States—will always be there.

**Mrs Madeleine Moon** (Bridgend) (Lab): Despite what the Secretary of State says, Lieutenant General Hodges and James Mattis have both said that we will lose our clout in NATO and our place at the top table if the cuts continue. Will the new Secretary of State commit to stopping the cuts to our capability, and will he make sure that Britain stays at the top table and that we have the capability to defend ourselves and our allies?

**Gavin Williamson:** The Government’s commitment to making sure that we have the very best for our armed forces has always been clear. The rising defence budget, which is going from £36 billion to £40 billion, is evidence of that commitment. [Interruption.] The United States knows quite clearly that we will always be there in support of them, regardless of what the hon. Lady’s leader may wish. [Interruption.]

Several hon. Members rose—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. An unseemly habit is developing of Members asking a question and then proceeding to rant from a sedentary position during the course of the reply. I had a letter about that today from a member of the public, who was most aggrieved. I am sure the hon. Lady would not wish to disappoint the person concerned, including the public, who was most aggrieved. I am sure the hon. Lady would not wish to disappoint the person concerned.

**Bob Stewart** (Beckenham) (Con): I am not normally, but thank you, Mr Speaker.

Bearing in mind our alliance relationships, how long does my right hon. Friend think that RAF pilots will have to continue to fly above Iraq on Op Shader, as apparently Daesh is almost defeated?

**Gavin Williamson:** My hon. Friend raises a very important point. While we have made such amazing progress, with over 1,600 operations flown by the RAF over Iraq and Syria, we should not think that Daesh, as territory is denied to them, are actually defeated, because they will disperse. The threat this country faces means that we will continue to have to fly operations above Iraq and Syria for a considerable time.

**Phil Wilson** (Sedgefield) (Lab): Our amphibious capability is important to our defence partners, so is the future of HMS Bulwark and HMS Albion secure?

**Gavin Williamson:** There has been an awful lot of speculation in the press about all of our capabilities. As part of the national security capability review, we have been asked to look at everything that we do, but I am not going to start any speculation about what the results will be. I have made it clear that I want to look at the evidence and the details, and we are not going to be rushed into any decisions.

**Lethal Autonomous Weapons**

9. **Jo Swinson** (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): What assessment he has made of the future threat posed by lethal autonomous weapons; and if he will make a statement. [902555]

**The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster):** The MOD continuously monitors developments and challenges arising from emerging weapon technology, including increasingly automated weapons systems. The UK considers the UN convention on certain conventional weapons to be the right forum in which to discuss lethal autonomous weapons systems, and welcomes the progress made in Geneva by the group of government experts earlier this month.

**Jo Swinson:** Weapons that can kill without human instruction or accountability are not science fiction, but a worrying potential reality with huge moral consequences. If we are to secure international agreement on the control of these lethal autonomous weapons, we need to start from a common understanding of the challenge, so will the Minister re-evaluate the UK’s definition of autonomous weapons systems to bring it into line with that of the United Nations?

**Mark Lancaster:** My understanding is that there is no international agreement on what an autonomous weapons system is, which is precisely why calls for, for example, pre-emptive bans would be inappropriate at this point. The task in hand is absolutely to get an internationally agreed definition, and we believe that the UN CCW is the right forum in which to do so.

**James Heappey** (Wells) (Con): Does the Minister agree that no matter what the advances of technology on the battlefield, only humans can effectively hold ground, deterring enemy activity and winning the hearts and minds of local communities, and that we will therefore always need an Army of about the current size or larger?

**Mark Lancaster:** We will definitely always need an Army.
National Security Capability Review

10. James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): What progress he has made on the national security capability review.  

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): With threats intensifying around the world, it is vital that our armed forces have the right capabilities in order to defend global security. We are making good progress: evidence has been reviewed, analysis conducted and options developed. I very much look forward to working with my hon. Friend and listening to his comments on how best to take this forward.

James Gray: I very much welcome the Secretary of State to his new job because, given his background, he is ideally suited to fighting the corner in the upcoming reviews. Will he please speak to the Prime Minister and remind her that the primary duty of any Government is the defence of the realm? Will he speak to the National Security Adviser, and indeed the Minister for the Cabinet Office, and remind them that they must not use this review as some sort of camouflage to cut our services? Will he speak to the Chancellor of the Exchequer and ensure that he digs deep in his pockets to produce the money we need? Above all, will he speak to his right hon. Friend the Chief Whip and remind him that, if the Chancellor does not do so, he will be facing a very substantial rebellion?

Gavin Williamson: I thank my hon. Friend. I can assure him that I will speak to every single one of the people he has mentioned. As he rightly points out, the defence of our nation is the primary responsibility of every Government, and it is one that I take exceptionally seriously. When we see our armed forces and everything they do, and the commitment with which they give themselves to it, we cannot be anything but awed by it. I will do everything I can to deliver for them.

15. Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the confirmation—a long-known position in Devonport—that the towed array Type 23 frigates will now be based in Devonport, but it is abundantly clear that a cross-party majority of this House is opposed to the Government’s plans to scrap HMS Albion, HMS Bulwark and our Royal Marines. Will the new Secretary of State now abandon those plans and confirm that we will protect our amphibious capabilities?

Mr Speaker: Order. I am glad that the hon. Gentleman got the word “capabilities” in, therefore making his question relevant to the question on the Order Paper.

Gavin Williamson: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), who has continuously lobbied me on the importance of the Type 23 frigate to the Plymouth Devonport dockyard. When I visited the dockyard, I was very impressed to see all the work being done there. I will be looking at all the capability within all our forces to ensure that we get the very best out of everything we do and every pound we spend.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I, too, welcome the Secretary of State to his new role and wish him all the best for the future, whatever challenges may now await him. I reiterate the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray), and echo by the Secretary of State, that the defence of the realm is the first duty of Government, above all others. Does he agree that our history as a nation teaches us that lesson again and again?

Gavin Williamson: My right hon. Friend always speaks with a high degree of common sense and truth. I pay tribute to him for the work he has done for the Ministry of Defence. I agree with his assessment, because ultimately a Government will be judged on how they defend the nation.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): Maintaining capabilities is as important as creating them, so how much will it cost to upgrade the nation’s docking facilities now that it is necessary to refuel all the Vanguard submarines, which was not originally planned, alongside deep maintenance to the Astute class? Who will pay for that?

Gavin Williamson: We are working with our industrial partners on that, including Babcock, and looking closely at what the costs will be. I am unable to reveal those costs to the House at this moment, but that body of work is continuing.

Defence Suppliers: Innovation

11. Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): What steps he is taking to encourage innovation by defence suppliers.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Harriett Baldwin): The £800 million defence innovation fund provides great opportunities for innovative suppliers. For example, I can today announce that the defence, science and technology laboratories, working with industry and academia, have developed a cutting-edge new chemical process to recover fingerprints, making it harder for terrorists and criminals to escape justice.

Mark Pawsey: The Minister identifies great innovation within our suppliers, but does she also agree that an example is shown by the advanced induction motor technology—the most power-dense electric motors available anywhere—that have been installed on the Queen Elizabeth aircraft carrier, which were manufactured by GE in my constituency?

Harriett Baldwin: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to speak up for the amazing work being done in his constituency, not only for the carrier programme, but for the long-lead items for the Type 26 frigates.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): The Government talk about wanting to increase the role of small and medium-sized enterprises in MOD procurement. Can the Minister tell us what steps have been taken to facilitate that?

Harriett Baldwin: A range of steps have been taken to facilitate that. For example, we have a single website, which is meant to be an easy portal into what we are
procuring at the MOD. We have shortened the contract we require small businesses to sign, from 18 pages down to three. We also have a system of people within the organisation who can help new businesses find their way around the intricacies of the MOD.

Service Families

12. Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve support for families of deployed service personnel. [902560]

13. Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve support for the families of deployed servicemen and women. [902561]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): Personnel deployed on operations must have confidence that their families at home are able to access the support they need. Our welfare support is provided to families before, during and after deployment.

Faisal Rashid: The tri-service families continuous attitude survey 2017 found that one in three spouses did not even know where to go for services that provide welfare support while their partner is deployed. Does the Minister agree it is vital that service families know where help is available? What steps are the Department taking to ensure that that is the case?

Mr Ellwood: I am sorry to hear that the hon. Gentleman has an example of where the system has perhaps not worked as it should. It is very important, if we are to have the most professional armed forces in the world, that those deployed know that their loved ones are looked after back home. I am happy to meet him to discuss in more detail the particular issue he raises.

Paul Flynn: Will the Minister join me in congratulating Newport County football club and Newport Live on recently joining the armed forces covenant? Does he agree that the only adequate way we can deal fairly with those who have been injured in body or mind by their service is to provide them with facilities and benefits that will leave them in a position where they do not have to rely on charities?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman makes reference to the armed forces covenant. It is probably the single biggest change in support and recognises that no member of the armed forces or veteran should be somehow disadvantaged because of their service. He is right to pay tribute to that, and I encourage all hon. Members to visit their local authorities and ask what is being done to ensure that they are living up to the requirements of the armed forces covenant.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): One of the most important things for deployed servicemen is to know that their families back home are in safe, secure and high-quality accommodation. The need for the redevelopment of the REEMA sites in Carterton, outside RAF Brize Norton in my constituency, is now acute. Will the Minister please tell me what hope the future accommodation will provide to those servicemen living in my constituency?

Mr Ellwood: I was hoping to share with the House the importance of the future accommodation model, which is ensuring that we update the accommodation available to armed forces personnel. Some want to rent and some want to live outside—that is what the accommodation model is all about. If I may, Mr Speaker, I would like to pay tribute to the work of the Families Federations in supporting our armed forces personnel and their families when personnel are on operations.

Operation Sophia

14. Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of Operation Sophia. [902562]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): The UK has been involved in the European Union’s Operation Sophia in the central Mediterranean since its start in June 2015. Since then, Royal Navy vessels have saved over 12,500 lives and over 500 smuggling vessels have been destroyed.

Alex Burghart: I thank the Minister for that response. It is welcome that Operation Sophia has saved so many lives, but it is clearly failing to disrupt human trafficking in the way that was intended. Will he talk to our European partners to ensure that it can be recalibrated to achieve that goal?

Mark Lancaster: We routinely assess our contribution against the operation’s core objectives. We recognise that it has not prevented the flow of migrants, but it has lessened the ability of smugglers to operate in international waters, and forms just one part of a wider Government strategy.

Topical Questions

T1. Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): I start by paying tribute to my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon), who has done so much for our armed services and was one of our longest-serving Secretaries of State for Defence. It is a true honour to be Defence Secretary, and I am proud to represent some of the finest armed forces in the world.

I also thank those involved in the UK contribution to the rescue operations for the Argentinian submarine San Juan. The UK contribution to the search includes HMS Protector, HMS Clyde, a C-130 and the Royal Navy's submarine parachute assistance group. I also thank the volunteers and service personnel who did so much to raise money for the poppy day appeal. The appeal, which is valued by so many, has raised tens of millions of pounds and will make a difference to many lives. I also thank the Chancellor of the Exchequer for his kindness and generosity in the allocation of LIBOR fines. I hope that such generosity will continue into the future.

Daniel Kawczynski: I am sure that my right hon. Friend will join me in paying tribute to the 150 British troops sent to north-east Poland, to the Suwalki Gap,
on rotational deployment. What steps will he take to ensure that we increase those numbers and continue to support our Polish allies in a post-Brexit world through our NATO alliance?

Gavin Williamson: I have already had a great opportunity to meet my Polish opposite number, who is incredibly grateful for our commitment to the defence of Poland. We constantly review troop numbers and are committed to the current rotation, but we are always open to the idea of committing more. We must not underestimate the threat that Russia continues to pose and must be ready to step up to such a threat. Although we are leaving the EU, our commitment to the collective defence of Europe is not diminished.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): It is alarming that one of the scant references to defence in the Budget is to forces families in the private rented sector—a less than subtle hint that the future accommodation model threatens to fragment our forces communities. With the private sector characterised by high rents and variable landlord performance, what guarantees can the Minister give that under the future accommodation model, no service personnel will be forced out of service accommodation and scattered into the private rented sector?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I think the hon. Lady would agree that we need to provide an offering that attracts new recruits and retains those serving. We also have to recognise the competition we now face from within the private sector and the jobs sector. That is why we have an armed forces people programme looking not just at accommodation but at the offering right across the board. It is important that we roll out the new accommodation model. A pilot scheme will be introduced at the end of next year. It will provide an offering that gives people the choice between staying on the garrison, renting and owning their own property.

Mr Ellwood: Mr Speaker, I join you and the Secretary of State in congratulating Prince Harry and Meghan on the announcement of their engagement. I had the privilege of working with Prince Harry in Toronto this year. The Invictus games are absolutely his project. They started in 2014, the year of the announcement of their engagement. I had the privilege of State in congratulating Prince Harry and Meghan on their great news today.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): Prince Harry has done tireless work to improve mental health support for our armed forces and veterans. Will the Minister update the House on what the Department is doing in that respect? Like all colleagues, I congratulate Prince Harry and Meghan Markle on their great news today.

Mr Ellwood: Mr Speaker, I join you and the Secretary of State in congratulating Prince Harry and Meghan on the announcement of their engagement. I had the privilege of working with Prince Harry in Toronto this year. The Invictus games are absolutely his project. They started in 2014, the year of the announcement of their engagement. I had the privilege of State in congratulating Prince Harry and Meghan on their great news today.

Gavin Williamson: I have already had a great opportunity to meet my Polish opposite number, who is incredibly grateful for our commitment to the defence of Poland. We constantly review troop numbers and are committed to the current rotation, but we are always open to the idea of committing more. We must not underestimate the threat that Russia continues to pose and must be ready to step up to such a threat. Although we are leaving the EU, our commitment to the collective defence of Europe is not diminished.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Harriett Baldwin): Of course I can confirm that we have a commitment to a world-class shipbuilding industry. Indeed, the shipbuilding industry in Scotland has a pipeline of work going out two decades.

T3. [902574] Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his appointment. Will he confirm that he is committed to the development of the Dreadnought style of submarines, and reaffirm his commitment to ensuring that we retain our independent nuclear deterrent?

Gavin Williamson: My hon. Friend has raised a valid point. Of the three major parties—us, the Labour party and the Scottish National party—the only one that can guarantee that we will have an independent nuclear deterrent is the Conservative party. Let no one forget that.

T8. [902579] Nick Smith (Blenau Gwent) (Lab): Britain’s defence industry supports hundreds of jobs in the South Wales valleys. Will the Government support our armoured fighting vehicle industry and allow it to compete for the prime contract for the Boxer armoured vehicle?

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Gentleman’s question gives me an opportunity to pay tribute to the fantastic work that is being done on the 589 Ajax vehicles. This is the largest contract for military vehicles that has been awarded in the country for 30 years, and it involves a lot of work for the South Wales workforce.

T4. [902575] Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): I was pleased to hear the Secretary of State express his steadfast support for NATO. What further steps will we be taking to support our NATO allies in Estonia in the face of increased Russian aggression?

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): My hon. Friend will be aware that at the Warsaw summit in 2016, NATO committed itself to responding to Russian belligerence through enhanced defence, deterrence and dialogue. I am delighted to have been able to visit our armoured battlegroup in Estonia this summer. About 800 personnel are delivering the enhanced forward presence, together with the Royal Air Force, which has already supported that operation on two occasions.

T10. [902581] David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Will the new Secretary of State get off to a better start than his predecessor by confirming that the new Royal Fleet Auxiliary orders will come to the Clyde, and that those vessels will not be built abroad?

Harriett Baldwin: I can confirm that—exactly as outlined in the recommendations of the national shipbuilding strategy, and as has been stated before in the House—that
particular part of our shipbuilding programme will be open to international competition, including shipyards on the Clyde.

T6. [902577] Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that as we leave the EU we must remain committed to all our European allies, and will he update the House on what we are doing through NATO to support our allies in Romania?

Gavin Williamson: Having had the opportunity to meet my opposite number from Romania, I am aware that one of the real threats that it continues to face is increasing pressure from Russia. Britain has a long and proud tradition of locating troops and resources in Romania, and we are continuing to do so with Typhoons operating in Romanian skies. Our commitment to that, along with the standing NATO naval task group, is an important bulwark against increasing Russian aggression on the eastern flank.

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): This coming Thursday marks the 36th anniversary of the disappearance of a young toddler, Katrice Leigh, from a NAAFI complex in west Germany. As the Royal Military Police’s Operation Bute is still live, will the Secretary of State agree to review the case and meet me, and my constituent Mr Richard Lee, Katrice’s father, to discuss the matter?

Gavin Williamson: I should be more than happy to review the case and meet the hon. Gentleman. Gentleman to discuss it in greater detail.

T7. [902578] Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): Last year it was announced that Royal Marines Base Chivenor, in my constituency, would be closing. The previous Secretary of State visited it subsequently, at my invitation, and announced a review of the decision. Will the Minister please update me on the progress of the review, and indicate when a final decision might be made?

Mr Ellwood: I am aware that 24 Commando Engineer Regiment is based at Chivenor, and that the location has historical importance. As my hon. Friend will know, it is due to close in 2027 as part of the rationalisation programme, but I should be more than happy to sit down with him and discuss the situation a bit further.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Minister has already spoken about the important bulwark against increasing Russian aggression on the eastern flank.

Mr Ellwood: I am aware that 24 Commando Engineer Regiment is based at Chivenor, and that the location has historical importance. As my hon. Friend will know, it is due to close in 2027 as part of the rationalisation programme, but I should be more than happy to sit down with him and discuss the situation a bit further.

T9. [902580] Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend provide an update on the work being done by British servicemen and women to train local forces in Afghanistan?

Gavin Williamson: We have already seen the announcement of an uplift of 85 personnel, who will be going to Afghanistan to support the work of the Afghan army. We will be supplementing that with an additional 60 service personnel, in order to continue the training and support that the Afghan army needs. While we have seen substantial progress made in Afghanistan, we cannot take that for granted. We must continue to support the Afghan Government as they continue to root out extremism.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): Despite the dangerously depleted state of the service, the Royal Navy has for the first time ever been chosen to mount Queen’s Guard—and very smart and taut they looked too, in my opinion. Will the Secretary of State take this opportunity to pay tribute to the Royal Navy—in fact, to the senior service?

Gavin Williamson: It would be a great honour to pay tribute to the senior service. Having been on HMS Queen Elizabeth, HMS Westminster and HMS Sutherland and seen the work they do, one cannot help but feel proud. I am very tempted to give you an honorary captaincy of a ship—[Interruption.] Sorry, and you, Mr Speaker. I think I have handed out two already. To be honest, Mr Speaker, I thought of you more as an admiral than as a captain, and if that gets me out of a slightly difficult situation, I will make you an admiral of a fleet.

Mr Speaker: I now realise something I had never previously known: that charm is the middle name of the right hon. Gentleman.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): RM Condor in my constituency of Angus has been home to the elite 45 Commando unit since 1971. Over the last 46 years it has been the lynchpin of the local community, and the base is one of Angus’s major employers. Will the Minister confirm that there are no plans to close RM Condor and that 45 Commando’s place in Angus is secure? Does he agree with me about the extremely reckless behaviour of nationalist politicians in scaremongering on this serious matter?

Mr Ellwood: As I touched on earlier, there is a large area of Britain owned by the MOD. It is important that we rationalise this real estate, and that means looking at a number of locations. Ninety-one across the country have already been earmarked. If memory serves, I think it is just the airfield in this case that needs to be looked at—the remainder is staying in place—but I will be happy to sit down and discuss it with my hon. Friend.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Captain Speaker, the Secretary of State is fresh, new and busy, but can I beg him to read John Fitzgerald Kennedy’s little book “Why England Slept”? Does he not think that England has been sleeping while the world has become a much more dangerous place?
Gavin Williamson: I think there has been a tendency since the early 1990s to think that the world is a much safer place than it actually is. There has been a tendency sometimes to sit back and believe that everything is just going to be safer and safer. The world is rapidly changing, and it is not just threats from terrorism: it is threats from peer enemies as well. We need to understand what those threats are and make sure that we are equipped to deal with them. I am looking forward to a Christmas break, as I am sure the whole House is, and if I get a few hours spare, I will be sure to read the book.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): At the risk of being given an honorary captaincy, may I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his job? I am sure he will do it extremely well. In his ongoing and delicate discussions with the Treasury, will he remain aware, first, that there are those of us on this side of the House who believe that the defence budget has been pared back about as far as it can be, and secondly, that when it comes to Trident renewal many of us on this side of the House do not believe it should be part of the defence budget? Indeed, it distorts the defence budget, and if that is part of his argument, he will have considerably more support than perhaps he knows.

Gavin Williamson: Everything that my right hon. Friend has raised will be part of the review. He has raised the important question of nuclear capability being part of the defence budget. It has traditionally not sat as part of the defence budget; that changed only post-2010. It is vital to look at all options as part of the national security and capability review, and I look forward to speaking to him and seeking his advice and thoughts on the issues that he has raised.

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): The Secretary of State began today by outlining the three places that he had visited in the early days of his appointment, on which I congratulate him. What reassurances can he give to the workers at Rosyth that their contracts will be secure following the departure of the Queen Elizabeth class carriers, and will he visit Rosyth?

Gavin Williamson: I have already had the privilege of visiting Scotland, and I will be certain to visit Rosyth in the future. I am incredibly grateful for the amazing work that has been done on the construction of HMS Queen Elizabeth and HMS Prince of Wales, and we look forward to working with all our industrial partners to ensure that we have a robust industrial defence sector. I very much hope that we will have the support of the hon. Gentleman's party for that and for the defence of the whole of the United Kingdom.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): The Secretary of State has had a foretaste from both sides of the House today of the furore that is likely to follow if HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark are deleted from the inventory. May I humbly suggest that, given the relatively small saving that that would represent, the game is simply not worth the candle?

Gavin Williamson: Someone once said to me that there was no such thing as a former Chief Whip, and I always listen with great intent and interest to the views of all colleagues.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. We must move on.

Harriett Baldwin: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I will take this point of order, colleagues, as I understand that it flows directly from these exchanges. Points of order would otherwise come after statements.

Harriett Baldwin: Further to the question from the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), I should like to clarify that the statement of intent for Qatar is for six Hawks, which gives 12 months of work at Brough.

Mr Speaker: I am most grateful to the Minister for that clarification—[Interruption.] Somebody is wittering from a sedentary position that he knew that, but he might be in an exclusive category of one. For others, however, the information is useful and we are grateful to the Minister for taking this opportunity to provide it.

Stephen Pound: Aye aye, sir.

Mr Speaker: Order.
Forensic Evidence: Alleged Manipulation

3.38 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if she will make a statement on the developments surrounding the alleged manipulation of forensic evidence at the Randox and Trimega laboratories in Manchester.

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): I thank the right hon. Lady for her question and apologise on behalf of the Home Secretary that it is me responding to her. I should also like to take this opportunity to place on record my congratulations to Prince Harry and his fiancée.

In January, Randox Testing Services informed Greater Manchester police that there may have been a manipulation of test results at its laboratories. Ongoing police investigations have since uncovered the possibility of the same manipulation having occurred at Trimega Laboratories. Criminal investigations by Greater Manchester police into the alleged manipulation of toxicology results are ongoing. The House will therefore understand that I must be cautious in my response, but I want to assure Members on both sides of the House that the matter is being treated with the utmost seriousness, given the need to retain public confidence in our justice system.

The Government’s immediate priority is to work with the police and the independent Forensic Science Regulator to establish the full scale of this issue and the potential impact on the public. I laid a written ministerial statement on this matter before the House on 21 November. I understand completely that public confidence in the justice system is absolutely vital, which was why the written ministerial statement noted that my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Ministry of Justice, who is in the Chamber, will be overseeing the review process for individual cases and will work closely with Ministers from other Departments who are impacted by the outcome of this investigation.

Retesting in criminal cases has been under way since May and is ongoing, and the police, the Crown Prosecution Service and coroners will be contacting affected individuals once the outcomes of the retests are known. The Department for Education has also asked all local authorities in England to review their records to establish whether they commissioned tests from Trimega, and to consider whether any action is necessary to fulfil their safeguarding responsibilities. It is unlikely that decisions about the welfare of children will have been taken solely on the basis of toxicology test results, but the Department for Education has asked local authorities to assure themselves that the rationale for decisions made about children’s safety and wellbeing is not now called into question. The Government fully understand that people may have concerns about family cases, which is why the Ministry of Justice has created an application form to allow people to apply to court to have their cases looked at free of charge, if they are concerned.

Government officials will continue to work with the police to monitor the scale of this pressing issue as information emerges. Furthermore, as Greater Manchester police’s investigation continues, we are considering what lessons can be learned to ensure that public confidence in forensic science is upheld.

Ms Abbott: Does the Minister accept that this is the biggest forensic science scandal for decades? It involves not only data that includes evidence used in sex cases, violent crimes, driving cases and unexplained deaths, but the liberty of subjects, so does he understand the concerns of victims and of people who might have been convicted on the basis of unsafe data? Is it true that Ministers did not consult the chief scientific adviser on the decision to privatise the Forensic Science Service but merely informed him of that decision two weeks before announcing it?

Is the Minister able to tell the House how long it will take for all the retesting to be completed? Is he able to say more about the scale of the problems at the two named laboratories? When will he be able to provide the House with full details, subject to legal proceedings? Are any other labs under suspicion? Is he able to specify the likely cost to the public purse arising from retests, appeal procedures, and possible litigation and compensation payments? What is the Government’s response to the likely human cost of incorrect forensic evidence in family court cases? What is the scale of comparable costs in criminal court cases?

Does the Minister agree with Professor Peter Gill, one of Britain’s most distinguished forensic scientists, who said that it was difficult to imagine the scandal having occurred under the Forensic Science Service, when scientists were routinely sent mock cases that were checked as a quality control? He stated:

“No reasonable set of quality standards could guarantee to prevent determined malpractice by skilled but corrupt personnel”.

Does the Minister accept that many stakeholders, including those in forensic science, believe that the problems and the allegedly faulty data that we are now seeing flow directly from the misconceived decision to privatise the Forensic Science Service?

Mr Hurd: I start by agreeing wholeheartedly with the right hon. Lady. Lady—that this is an extremely serious matter. Members on both sides of the House will completely understand why it could be unsettling for any potential victims—there is no doubt about that at all. At its heart, this matter is about public confidence in our justice system—it is as serious as that.

Where I do disagree with the right hon. Lady—we are coming from a different place on this—is when she tries to squeeze this into a Labour political narrative around “public good, private bad.” I simply tell her what the independent Forensic Science Regulator has expressed:

“No reasonable set of quality standards could guarantee to prevent determined malpractice by skilled but corrupt personnel”.

I would go further. I think that there is general understanding and agreement that there has in fact been increased stringency in the standards and quality requirements for forensic science within the CPS—[Interruption.] There is muttering on the Labour Benches, but this has been driven by the Forensic Science Regulator, who in 2011 published the first codes of practice and conduct for forensic service providers. I am not at all sure that we could have regulated against this situation.

The right hon. Lady asks about testing. I can confirm that 70% of top priority cases are already in the system for retesting—there are around 10,000 cases in relation to Randox. I cannot answer some of her other questions because they fall within the boundaries of the police criminal investigation.
I understand the right hon. Lady’s point about costs and the impact on the criminal justice system, about which we are obviously concerned, but it is too early in the testing process to be making judgments. If we are to have a clearer view of the impact, we will need to see where that process leads but, as she would expect, we and our colleagues in the Ministry of Justice are monitoring it very closely.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am keen to try to conclude these proceedings by 4 o’clock, if possible. This is an important matter, but there is a statement to follow and a very, very heavily subscribed continuation of the Budget debate, which colleagues will want to factor into their calculations when asking questions.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Perhaps the Minister can help us a little more on this very serious matter. Can he give us some idea of the dates over which this alleged wrongdoing took place and how they relate to the changes in the Forensic Science Service?

Mr Hurd: My hon. Friend is entirely right that what is alleged goes back over many years—[Interruption.]—some of the issues at the other organisation may go back as far as 2010. My central point is that any attempt to try to link this to the FSS issue is driven by tribal politics, rather than clear assessments of the underlying reality.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): It is imperative that the public trust forensic science testing and, by extension, criminal and civil justice as a whole. There were warning signs about the firm’s predecessor, Trimega, which had seen children almost taken into care on the basis of erroneous evidence. That major mistake should have been a red flag to the Government, so why were they not alert to the risk presented by the Randox lab, given that its predecessor had such a poor record?

Mr Hurd: I clarify that, although there are possible employee links, Trimega and Randox are separate organisations. Trimega was doing something different and was subject to a different regulatory regime—perhaps for better or worse, the regulatory regime in relation to the family courts has always been lighter. However, I completely agree with the hon. Lady about the seriousness of the allegations and the issue underlying the investigation into Randox, which is why, following the analysis of what has been done, I believe that the Government and the system have acted very quickly to respond to the information we received in January 2017 by setting up proper processes of retesting and prioritising these cases.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): To reassure my constituents, will the Minister confirm that, for the most serious family and criminal cases, it is highly unlikely that a decision would have been made solely on the basis of one individual toxicology test?

Mr Hurd: I do believe that to be true, and my understanding is that in some of these family cases more than one test will be taken. However, that does not take away from the uncertainty that people involved in these cases may feel, which is why my colleagues in the Ministry of Justice have set up a bespoke process that people can access quickly under which they can request that their case is reviewed.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): In passing, it is worth noting that when my right hon. Friend the Member for Tynemouth (Mr Campbell) and I were Home Office Ministers, we ruled out the privatisation of the Forensic Science Service. But my question to the Minister is this: if wrongdoing by a private sector company is found in due course, what penalties will be levied against it?

Mr Hurd: How nice to have been a Minister before the age of austerity. The answer to the right hon. Gentleman’s question is that he is jumping the gun in terms of the police investigation. We should let Greater Manchester police do their work.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Obviously this is extremely serious. Can my hon. Friend confirm that his Department is providing all the necessary support so that the police can prioritise testing live cases?

Mr Hurd: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. Again, I am satisfied, having reviewed our process, as I do regularly, that the system and the gold command, which was set up very quickly, have done a good enough job of prioritising cases and getting retesting going as quickly as possible. As I said, the last numbers I saw suggested that 70% of the priority cases were in the system for retesting.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Is the Minister able to say whether Randox’s contract has been suspended? Is he able to say, in general terms, whether a company that was guilty of manipulation would have to pay all costs associated with retrial, for instance?

Mr Hurd: As I understand it, the police have suspended all contracts with Randox. Randox is co-operating with us fully on identifying the priority cases and getting the retesting done as quickly as possible. On the right hon. Gentleman’s question about future costs, I refer back to what I said before: we need better evidence about the impact on cases.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The Minister accuses Labour of politicising the forensic service, yet it was his Government who chose to privatise it out of the mistaken and ideologically bankrupt view that everything is better when it is done in the private sector for the profit motive. Will he now distance himself from that ideology and recognise that public confidence in the justice system requires public servants?
Mr Hurd: I refer the hon. Lady to what I said before and to the view of the independent regulator, who arguably knows more about this than anyone in the House. She has expressed the view that “no reasonable set of quality standards could guarantee to prevent determined malpractice by skilled but corrupt personnel”, which it looks increasingly clear is what has happened. That is what the independent regulator has said, and I am really sorry if it does not correspond with the views of the Labour party.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Professor Peter Gill is the most distinguished forensic scientist. He did magnificent work on DNA mass profiling. His authority is unquestioned, and he warned that what happened with privatisation would lead to the present situation because of a lack of trust in results. I have spent my working life in laboratories, so I know how highly prized the integrity of scientific results is. This is a very rare situation, with an accusation having been made, and I am afraid it is the Government who have taken a political stance on this. The Opposition and the scientific community are absolutely right to be deeply concerned.

Mr Hurd: As I said clearly at the outset, I do think that the situation is extremely serious, but I agree with the hon. Gentleman’s diagnosis that it may be a rare one. Again, I repeat the view that the regulator has reached about the efficacy of any standards of regulation to prevent “determined malpractice by skilled but corrupt personnel”.

Again, I place on record the progress that has been made since 2011, when the regulator published the first codes of practice and conduct for forensic science providers. I do think that there is increased stringency in the standards and quality requirements for forensic science, and that matters enormously because of the way this underpins confidence in forensic science within the criminal justice system.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): The Minister does himself no credit when he says that this is a tribal issue. I direct him to three reports—not one or two—by the cross-party Science and Technology Committee that criticised his Government’s Home Office for not consulting Professor Silverman, who was the scientific adviser to the Home Office. I also suggest that he reads the evidence—three times—from Dr Tully, the Forensic Science Regulator, who said that murderers and rapists will go free because of the changes that the Government made. Not one party but all parties came to that conclusion. Given what appears to have happened in my constituency, will the Minister, after the courts have dealt with the matter, look into conducting a full review of forensic science services?

Mr Hurd: As I have made clear, this is an enormously important issue. We need to get hard evidence of what happened and its impact on the system, and all lessons will have to be learned from that process. I know that the Opposition do not like it, but the point I am trying to make is that the urgent question was about what happened at Randox, not about the privatisation of the Forensic Science Service. As the independent regulator said, there is no link.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I used to work for the NHS as a clinical scientist, and every test that we did in our laboratory, including toxicology testing, was subject to rigorous internal and external quality control standards. It is my understanding that the Forensic Science Regulator has no statutory authority over private forensics laboratories. When will the Minister give the regulator statutory authority?

Mr Hurd: In the 2016 forensic science strategy, we committed to placing the Forensic Science Regulator on a statutory footing by the end of this Parliament. We are seeking the appropriate parliamentary opportunity to do that.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The Minister does not seem to be aware that senior police officers think that the Forensic Science Service has been a mess ever since privatisation, with long delays affecting victims and the wider justice system. One reality of the current situation is that there will have to be significant retesting, which will cause further delays. The Government have to look into this matter and reviewing the decision to privatise needs to be central to that process.

Mr Hurd: I agree that retesting is the priority and that that needs to be done as quickly as possible—that is a Government priority—but I do not think that revisiting the decision on the Forensic Science Service is a priority. As I have said, that decision was taken in 2011. We have seen increased stringency in the standards and quality requirements. We should not be revisiting those old arguments.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Following on from the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), the Forensic Science Regulator said in January that she needed statutory powers to enforce regulation as soon as possible—not in 2022, but as soon as possible. Will the Minister think again?

Mr Hurd: I do not need to think again. I have said we are going to do that and that we are trying to find the right parliamentary opportunity to do so.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Children’s social services and judges make decisions on adoption and fostering on the basis of forensic science services. What assurance can the Minister give, especially in relation to adoptions since 2010, that children have not been removed from families on the basis of false forensic information? What conversations has he had with Ministers in the Welsh Government about the failings of the Forensic Science Service with respect to Welsh adoptions?

Mr Hurd: My hon. Friend the Minister for Children and Families, who is sitting next to me, has written to all local authorities to ask them to review the cases in which the organisations in question may have been involved. As I understand it, he should be receiving all the evidence by the end of this week and we will take it from there.
Industrial Strategy

3.59 pm

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on the Industrial Strategy White Paper, which has been published today.

Today, at one of the most important, exciting and challenging times in our history, the future is unfolding before our very eyes. New technology is creating new industries, changing existing ones and transforming the way in which we live our lives. We need to ensure that we are well prepared to prosper in this future. The decision to leave the European Union makes that even more important. More decisions about our economic future will be in our own hands to take, and it is vital that we take them well.

We start from a position of considerable strength: we are an open and flexible economy, built on trade and engagement with the world; we have earned a reputation as a dependable and confident place in which to do business thanks to our high standards, respected institutions and the rule of law; we have achieved higher levels of employment than ever before in our history; we are known for innovation and discovery, with some of the best universities and research institutions in the world producing some of the most inventive people on earth; and we have commercial and industrial sectors, from advanced manufacturing to financial services, and from life sciences to the creative industries, which are among the best in the world.

Our industrial strategy will build on those strengths, but it will also address weaknesses. We need to do more to make the most of our untapped potential. As the Chancellor said in last week’s Budget, although we are proud of our strong record of high employment, our average productivity—output per hour worked—is less than it could be. Productivity may not be the most exciting term, but it really does matter for people all around the UK. High productivity means greater earning power and better paid jobs. For our country, it means more money to spend on our public services.

Today’s Industrial Strategy White Paper starts with the five foundations of productivity: ideas; people’s skills; infrastructure; the business environment; and the importance of every place in the country. For each, we are clear about the kind of economy that we need to be.

Our vision is that the UK will be the world’s most innovative economy. It will have good jobs and greater earning power for all, make a major upgrade to our infrastructure, be the best place in which to start and grow a business and have prosperous communities across the country. It is a long-term strategy, working to make changes now, but looking to the future, and we are taking action to realise it. Let us take research and development as an example. Our reputation is as one of the best countries in the world for science and research, but we cannot take that for granted; we must reinforce it. Last week, we announced an increase in public investment in R and D, with the aim of reaching a combined public-private spend up from 1.7% to 2.4% of GDP by 2027, and to 3% thereafter.

I strongly believe that there are few problems that cannot be solved by the innovation and ingenuity of British business and science. History has shown that partnerships between business, Government and science can work—from the outstanding collaborations that we have had in the automotive and aerospace sectors to the recent partnerships in our creative industries.

Strategy has to be for the long term; a short-term strategy is a contradiction in terms. Other countries have benefited from establishing policies and institutions that can endure. That is why, through the consultation on the Green Paper, we have worked with businesses, industry bodies, investors, trade unions, universities, colleges and research institutions, and many others to establish a shared commitment to the actions that we will take now and in the future.

After our consultation on the Industrial Strategy Green Paper, we saw an overwhelming response to the question that we asked on whether we should pursue sector deals, as industries came forward with plans for their future. Today, we have struck ambitious sector deals with four sectors: life sciences, construction, artificial intelligence and automotive. I welcome the huge interest on the part of other sectors that are coming forward with their plans. There are still those who hear the words “industrial strategy” and associate them with the mistakes of the past—of thwarting competition, shielding incumbents and continuing with the status quo. This is not the approach that we will take. Our modern industrial strategy is not about protecting the past. It is about taking control of our future as a nation.

We have set out four grand challenges—identified on the advice of our leading scientists and technologists—that will be supported by investment from the challenge fund and matched by commercial investment. The challenges are: artificial intelligence and the data-driven economy; clean growth; the future of mobility; and meeting the needs of an ageing society. Whether we like it or not, these challenges are sweeping the world. If we act now, we can lead from the front, but if we wait and see, other countries will seize the initiative. For each of these challenges, our industrial strategy sets out how we can seize the opportunity—from using AI to raise productivity in all sectors to making our energy intensive industries competitive in the clean economy, and from supporting the transition to zero-emission vehicles to harnessing the power of big data to diagnose illnesses earlier and improve the quality of life for so many people in this country.

Britain needs to be a leader, not a follower—a country that is ahead of the curve, not behind the times. This is an opportunity to rally behind this industrial strategy, to raise our productivity and to build a country that is fit for the future. I commend this statement to the House.

4.5 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): I am pleased that the White Paper seems to acknowledge many of the fundamental problems faced by our economy, and give credit to the Secretary of State for adopting one of Labour’s policies to set national missions or “challenges”, as he likes to call them. But as I delve into the finer details of the paper, the aims of which may be well intentioned, it appears to be little more than a repackaging of existing policies and commitments.

The Office for Budget Responsibility figures contained in last week’s Budget were a damning assessment of the impact of seven years of Conservative austerity, with productivity, real wages, and GDP growth and GDP per capita revised down, but debt revised up,
The Conservatives’ economic credibility has been shot to pieces, with people earning less than they did in 2007 until at least 2023. We have to go back to 1820, when George IV ascended the throne, before we find a time when productivity increased less than this over a 10-year period.

Today, I was full of hope—desperately hoping that the Government would press the reset button—but they have simply restated their plans for a £31 billion national productivity investment fund. As TUC analysis shows, this only raises investment to 2.9% of GDP, whereas the average for leading OECD industrial nations is 3.5%. Labour even called on the Chancellor to use his Budget to level up regional investment in line with London, but only one—just one—of the named transport projects in the national productivity investment fund is in the north. The development of local industrial strategies is certainly welcome, but will the Secretary of State admit that they simply could not deliver the desired effects under the Government’s current investment plans?

The strategy restates the commitment to raise total research and development investment to 2.4% of GDP. This is moving in the right direction, but it is still behind world leaders and far less ambitious than Labour’s commitment to reaching 3% of GDP by 2030. The allocation of £725 million to the industrial strategy challenge fund is again welcome, but it seems to lack any real strategy. As Sheffield Hallam University recently found, the areas already identified by the fund “account for little more than 1 per cent of the whole economy (by employment) and 10 per cent of UK manufacturing.”

Many of the policies focus on R and D spending in only a handful of specified sectors in which the UK already has a comparative advantage. This will do nothing to help the millions who work in large, low-wage, low-productivity sectors such as retail, hospitality and care, or people who do not live in the golden triangle made up of London, Cambridge and Oxford.

Finally, this industrial strategy fails to start from the bottom up. It is all well and good talking about leading the fourth industrial revolution, but this can only happen with a highly skilled, technology-savvy workforce. After seven years of Conservative Government, only 11% of students in England take IT at GCSE, and only 30% are at schools that provide it. That is certainly not laying the foundations for an economy of the future, and the strategy fails to make up for the cuts inflicted on our education system since 2010. Indeed, the money allocated for the national retraining scheme amounts to only 6.6% of the funding slashed from the adult skills budget since 2010.

This industrial strategy may well be a start, but I fear that the Government have simply produced a public relations gimmick that is thin on detail, thin on investment and thin on ideas. I truly hope the Secretary of State will listen to my concerns as well as those from business and the trade union movement over the coming months, because we have one chance to reset our economy, and if we let this slip through our fingers, the people of Britain will never forgive us.

Greg Clark: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. When she has the time to read the Industrial Strategy White Paper we have published today, I hope that she will reflect on the substance, content and ambition of this strategy and that she will come out in support of it.

One thing that the hon. Lady should know, and that every Member of the House knows, is that for our country to prosper, we need a sound economy. The last time the Labour party was in government, we had the biggest financial crisis since the 1930s, racking up billions and billions of pounds of extra debt for our children and grandchildren to pay. As usual, the Labour party has not learned the lesson from that, because its proposal is to borrow an extra £250 billion. In attracting the confidence of the world to invest in this country, the hon. Lady needs to make sure that the economy is sound. In the prospectus that she puts forward, there is nothing that is capable of achieving that.

In the weeks ahead, I hope the hon. Lady will discover that, around the country—from north, south, east and west, and from business organisations to trade unions to our respected scientific institutions—there has been substantial collaboration, based on the Green Paper, which has resulted in some major changes. It is a strategy for the long term—it is right that it should be the strategy for the long term—but it is being backed up by investment now. In the Budget just last week, we saw the announcement of the biggest increase in investment in research and development in this country that there has ever been. The hon. Lady should welcome that because it is being welcomed throughout the country.

With our partners right across the United Kingdom, we will implement this industrial strategy. I hope, when the hon. Lady goes out and talks to businesses and leaders across the land, that she will find that there is great support for this approach and that she will join us in seeking to implement it and to provide the certainty we need in the years ahead.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Just before we get under way, I remind the House that the subsequent business is very heavily subscribed. Secondly, I point out again to the House, as I did on Thursday, that there is a growing phenomenon, I am afraid, of Members turning up late for statements—that is to say, after the relevant Minister has begun the statement—and then expecting to be called. This is in defiance of very long-standing parliamentary convention. So, today, I am afraid, and there are some very capable and assiduous Members involved—no fewer than seven—I am going to say I will not call people who turned up late. Members have really got to get used to looking at the monitor and getting here in time, and if they do not, they lose out. So please do not come to the Chair and say, “Yes, but there is a special mitigating circumstance.” I was responding to an email from a long-lost relative” or, alternatively, “I was feeding my budgerigar, and it couldn’t wait.” The answer is, those matters, if they arise, must be put second, and the Chamber first. We will await the contributions of those distinguished and illustrious Members on another occasion.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): After the unremitting negativity from Labour, may I say how enthusiastic my right hon. Friend has been—and rightly so—about advanced manufacturing, R and D, science and technology, and pharmaceuticals? What steps is he taking to increase productivity in a different sector that employs over 3 million people in the United Kingdom—tourism and hospitality?
Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I am grateful for his question. One of the challenges is that we have to make sure, right across the economy, that we are taking the opportunities to raise the productivity and performance of sectors in which many people are employed. The tourism and hospitality sectors are very important in that. They feature in the industrial strategy as two areas where it is particularly important to work together with firms big and small, as we are doing, to establish training institutions and spread technology so that we can raise their performance to compare with the strongest performance elsewhere in the economy.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of the statement.

We welcome, finally, this overdue industrial strategy. We welcome also the recognition of the grand challenges of artificial intelligence, clean growth, future mobility, and the ageing society—all of which are very important to Scotland. It therefore says everything that there has been no consultation with the Scottish Government nor any attempt to match the Scottish Government’s economic plan, particularly given that the Scottish Government lead in life sciences. How will that working with the Scottish Government be taken forward?

This is not an outcomes-based approach such as we have seen working successfully in Scotland. A plan without knowing its destination is just a plan, and it does not guarantee success. If it did, it would answer the big question on skills. The Secretary of State said that there was no point in having short-term strategy, but it has been pointed out, in terms of the Budget, that the training and learning budget fell by 13.6% per person in real terms between 2007 and 2015. With the uncertainty over Brexit already affecting EU nationals, perhaps he could tell industries where the skills that will be required in the short to medium term will come from.

While we welcome the £7 billion, which is a very big number, for productivity, why, according to the Red Book, does it apparently not come into effect until 2022? Do we not need to address productivity now?

Greg Clark: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his questions. Working together with the Scottish Government is very important. On some devolved matters, it makes sense for them to be joined up. Last week, I had the privilege of meeting Keith Brown, the Scottish Government Minister responsible for this area. When the hon. Gentleman gets a chance to read the paper, he will see that there is substantial reference to our close working with the Scottish Government. It is very important that we do that.

On skills, the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. It is foundational that we should equip our people with the skills that they need to take on the jobs that are being created. He might have missed the fact that we have increased very substantially the number of hours that people are being taught in further education colleges, so as to raise them in line with the best in the world. That is a very important contribution to this.

On the extra investment that the Chancellor announced, the national productivity investment fund is to be further extended to 2022. That is why the figure that he announced was for that particular year.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State on this document. The problem with Labour Front Benchers is that they think it is all about money. Money is important, but it is how and where we spend it that matters the most. We need an industrial strategy that is bold, realistic about the failings, and has a huge vision. This document has that. Will he commit to making sure that he continues to work with British business to put this excellent strategy into action?

Greg Clark: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, not least for her excellent work as a Minister in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills in laying the foundations for this work, which is of benefit to every single part of the country. One of the mistakes that was made over many decades by successive Governments was not to recognise the importance of local economies in creating the right conditions for businesses to succeed. That is prominent in the strategy, and I know that she has been a particular champion of it.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): Industrial strategy, particularly in sectors such as the automotive sector, depends on a model of just-in-time delivery. One concern of that sector, in particular, is that things will be held up at ports if we leave the European Union and the customs union. What assurances can the Secretary of State give businesses that we will have frictionless trade as well as tariff-free trade after we leave the European Union? Without that, productivity will deteriorate even further.

Greg Clark: The hon. Lady is absolutely right about the importance of making sure that we can continue and, indeed, expand our trade, not just with the European Union but with the rest of the world. She is absolutely right that the model of the automotive sector and many other sectors requires the availability at very short notice of components and products. That is why it is very important that the deal that we negotiate should give us the ability to trade without tariffs and with the minimum of friction.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): How confident is my right hon. Friend that we can measure productivity accurately?

Greg Clark: My right hon. Friend asks a characteristically acute question. It is true to say that some of the measures of productivity do not do justice to the importance of the issue. We would not, for example, want to substitute our model of very high employment for the model of some other countries, where there is very high productivity among people who are employed, but a large number of people unemployed. That would be the wrong thing to do. We propose in the strategy to set up an independent council, which will set a baseline against which our performance can be judged independently and which will report to the House. I think that that is the right way to apply rigour to the question that he raises.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): I welcome the statement, albeit that it has taken the Government two and a half years to conduct what is, essentially, a rebranding exercise. Does the Secretary of State agree that the essence of improving productivity is skills? If he is going to reverse the absolutely catastrophic decline
now occurring in apprenticeships, he should go back to the model that he and I worked on. It would have increased the number and quality of apprenticeships and scrapped the apprenticeship levy, which has been appallingly maladministered.

Greg Clark: I had hoped that the right hon. Gentleman would give a more enthusiastic welcome to some things, which I thought he would be in favour of, not least the substantial increase in investment in research and development. When he was Secretary of State, we managed to maintain the level, but this is the biggest increase there has ever been, and I thought that he would welcome that.

Apprenticeships are very important. We have made great strides in improving the number and quality of apprenticeships. The new system is bedding in, and I think most observers recognise that the initial figures are not a guide to the future. The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that we want to encourage the take-up of more good apprenticeships.

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): Unlike my former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable), may I welcome what the Secretary of State has said, which is both insightful and forward looking? In the light of that former relationship, I encourage him to be willing and patient in dealing with collaboration, which is something that the right hon. Gentleman and I had to deal with.

May I ask my right hon. Friend about a local question, which also concerns life sciences? Hertfordshire has the highest life sciences sector concentration of almost any county. May I therefore ask Ministers to involve our businesses, our local enterprise partnership and our local authorities closely when it comes to life sciences—welcome as it is that investment has been announced today, albeit elsewhere?

Greg Clark: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his welcome for the White Paper. He will see that one of its important features is the recognition that clusters—that is to say, businesses in the same sector all reinforcing each other—can lead to excellent performance.

On the basis of this strategy, substantial new investments have been committed in the life sciences sector, but these are the first in a pipeline of new investments that will follow all across the country and in every part of the United Kingdom, justifying the attention and the work that we have been engaged in—led by Sir John Bell, the eminent scientist—to make sure that we are the go-to place in the world for anyone with an interest in the future of the life sciences.

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): The publication of the strategy is welcome, but I have two asks of the Secretary of State. First, for this to succeed in the long term, it has to be able to survive changes of Government. Is it not about time that we set up a cross-party commission to build the political consensus needed to produce further iterations of the strategy? Secondly, let us be honest and recognise that the biggest institutional barrier to what he is proposing is the Treasury. Treasury orthodoxy has never properly got behind the concept of an industrial strategy. Is it not time to change his Department into a proper Ministry of economic reform that takes on all non-fiscal economic policy, across the Government, and which is equal to, not subordinated to, the Treasury?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman makes an intriguing set of suggestions. Let me start by completely agreeing with him that it is right to establish and support a strong consensus on the long-term commitments that we need to make in this country. It seems to me that other countries around the world have benefited from having a shared commitment to policies and institutions that investors know are going to endure, and that is the approach we intend to take. That is precisely the reason why we have had such an extensive consultation, involving all parts of the country and all parts of the economy—and across parties. He is right that the best way for the strategy to endure is for it to have the commitment and involvement of people who have an interest in the future success of the United Kingdom.

This is true across Government, too. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that in times past—in decades past—the finance Ministry has regarded itself as precisely that, but I think the importance of accepting that our national prosperity requires business to succeed in all parts of the country is recognised. Anyone who looked at the Budget last week and saw the commitment made by the Chancellor to, for example, research and development, will recognise that this is a whole-Government commitment, but the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that it also needs to embrace the whole country.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): On the point made by the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable), it is worth noting and putting on the record that we have 900,000 apprentices at the moment, which is the highest ever figure in our island’s history.

I strongly welcome the industrial strategy. Does my right hon. Friend not agree that a key part of it is supporting further education and skills, including through institutes of technology? An important example is the multimillion pound investment in the new Harlow College skills academy at Stansted airport, which was visited today by my wonderful hon. Friend the Minister for Climate Change and Industry.

Greg Clark: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his comments. He worked very hard to achieve the success in the number of apprenticeships that we now have. He is right in what he says about Harlow College. That is a very good example of how working closely with a big local employer—in this case, Stansted airport—can make sure that the jobs available through the success of that airport and its associated industries can be taken up and spread among people in his and neighbouring constituencies. It is doing a fantastic job—I know my right hon. Friend was thrilled by the Minister’s visit today—and I am pleased to say that it features very strongly in the industrial strategy.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State seriously think that it is possible to convince the country that a Tory Government—I repeat, a Tory Government—have got the capacity to introduce a decent industrial strategy? In 18 Tory years while I was in the House, they closed down most of the shipbuilding industry,
they got rid of a lot of the steel industry, they closed every single pit and now they are buying 40 million tonnes of coal from countries we do not even trust. These are the actions of a Tory Government, and—remember—let us stop this nonsense about trying to tell the people that unemployment is now lower than it was after a Labour Government, because during the Labour Government after the second world war, it was down to 2.2%, or 440,000, and when it hit 1 million, Ted Heath was in government. What a lousy bunch!

Greg Clark: What I say to the hon. Gentleman is that every time there is a Labour Government, it is a Conservative Government who have to reverse the chaos caused and revive the economy. To give him an opportunity to calm down and reflect on the policies set out in the strategy, let me make him a present of this copy of the White Paper, which I hope he will find inspiring reading. I am sure that he will look at the policies in detail and, when he comes back for the next Question Time, bring himself to commend them.

Conor Burns (Bournemouth West) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for his comments. The role of universities is absolutely vital. They have worked with us very closely on the development of the strategy. They are central to the local economy in almost every part of the country, and not just in educating the population—local people and those who travel to study—but in the research and leadership they offer. I would be delighted to visit Bournemouth’s excellent university with my hon. Friend, to congratulate it and discuss how we can take its success forward in the local area.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): The Secretary of State answered my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) elegantly, but all he really did was restate the premise of her question, so let me give him another chance. Page 202 of the White Paper refers to a “programme that will target areas where businesses need to improve to match the best in Europe.”

The problem with competing with businesses in Europe is that they will be members of the single market and, according to the Government, we will not. Has he made representations to the Prime Minister, asking her to change her position?

Greg Clark: I am interested that the hon. Lady has got to page 202 already—that is high productivity. Of course, as the White Paper makes very clear, we want not only to continue our international collaborations, but to deepen them. That is very important, because the most productive industries are international. A big part of our negotiations, which she knows full well are continuing, is focused on getting a deal that is not just in our interests, because exactly the same logic applies to our European partners; they have no more interest than we do in interrupting those deep and successful relationships. That is why we have made that commitment.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I welcome the industrial strategy, as a proud midlands MP representing a constituency that played its part in building our reputation as the workshop of the world. Will my right hon. Friend please say a little more about how we will go further in addressing some of the productivity gaps between London, the south-east, Oxford and Cambridge and our regions? May I suggest that a great way to do that would be to build an institute of technology in Redditch?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend makes an excellent proposal. Let me choose one of the aspects of the industrial strategy that is relevant: the importance of local leadership with the powers to make a difference. She is fortunate as a midlands MP, as we are fortunate in this country, to have Andy Street as the new West Midlands Mayor, who is already playing such a significant leadership role in the area. As my hon. Friend will know, last week, the Budget set out significant investment in the region’s transport system in order better to connect those areas that have not been well connected to Birmingham and other towns and cities in the Midlands, which we know internationally is key to raising productivity.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I absolutely applaud the industrial strategy for saying that we need to build on our strengths. One of our great strengths is our foundation industries, such as steel. Will the Government get on with energetically pursuing a sector deal with the steel industry, so we can add it to the other four deals he announced today?

Greg Clark: I will indeed. The Minister for Climate Change and Industry—there is no more energetic person than the Minister of State—met the steel sector today to pursue those discussions. The sector features in the White Paper published today and the hon. Gentleman knows that I agree with him on its importance. I am full of enthusiasm for that being brought to a conclusion.

Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s emphasis on creative industries and construction, both of which are large employers in my constituency. Does he agree that there is a real risk of inflationary pressure in the construction sector, particularly if we are to meet our ambitious housing targets; and that in the short term, as we leave Europe, that will mean a need for continuing immigration and, in the longer run, for encouraging more young people into this industry, which is often very well rewarded?

Greg Clark: As my hon. Friend knows from the Budget, we are committed to a big expansion of housebuilding. It is therefore important to ensure we have the skills and the workforce to take up those opportunities. One of the prime areas of focus in the construction sector deal is investment by the sector in training the next generation of construction workers, so we can avoid precisely the problem he describes.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): Does the Secretary of State recognise the urgency of reaching a decision on our future participation in successors to Horizon 2020? Does he also recognise that further public investment
will be needed to reach 2.4% of GDP on research and development spend? How will he ensure that that public investment is spent around the country, so that everyone benefits from it?

**Greg Clark:** I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his questions. He is right that international co-operation in research—not just with other European countries, but around the world—is the foundation of our success. Typically, Nobel prizes are these days awarded to teams representing many different countries. We are very clear in the strategy that we want to continue and extend the joint work we do with other countries. On the increase required, he will see in the strategy document that it is to be allocated by our scientific community, but with a particular regard to how we can make sure that clusters of excellence in research all around the country can benefit from the increased funding.

**Giles Watling** (Clacton) (Con): I commend the Secretary of State for his very positive statement. Does he agree that the tourism industry—worth £127 billion, 9% of GDP and vital to my constituents in the glorious sunshine coast of Clacton-on-Sea—should be at the forefront of any industrial strategy, as it is a powerful way forward out of recession and post-Brexit?

**Greg Clark:** I do indeed. Many of us have had the pleasure of visiting Clacton and Frinton, whether as day-trippers or in some other capacity, in recent years and look forward to doing so again. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that tourism is a very important industry. The sector has in some cases been associated with lower levels of pay than other areas. Working with the sector, we want to see how we can invest in improvements in productivity, so it can be a much better paid sector than has been associated with it in the past.

**John Grogan** (Keighley) (Lab): Given the important chapter in “Industrial Strategy” about devolution, will the Secretary of State agree to meet the 17 council leaders in Yorkshire from all parties who are advocating a “one Yorkshire” devolution settlement, so they can work in partnership with the Government to deliver an effective industrial strategy for the county?

**Greg Clark:** I would be delighted to do that. It is a mark of the strategy that it points to the success of decisions made locally and having clear local leadership. There have been, and continue to be, discussions in Yorkshire on the best arrangement, but I am very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues.

**Fiona Bruce** (Conleton) (Con): I welcome the strategy. Siemens, which has a pioneering digital factory in Congleton, is one of the companies that has led on the recent “Made Smarter” review. Does the Secretary of State agree with the principles behind the review, and that priority should be given to upskilling 1 million industrial workers to enable digital technologies to be successfully exploited, and so put the UK at the forefront of the fourth industrial revolution?

**Greg Clark:** I do indeed, and I would like to put on the record my thanks to Professor Jürgen Maier, the head of Siemens in this country, and his team for producing that very important report. It is a good example of how digital technology affects almost every sector in the country. He has recommended a series of steps that we will implement in the months ahead and that will be of great benefit to the whole economy.

**Tony Lloyd** (Rochdale) (Lab): The Secretary of State will recognise that further education and apprenticeships are fundamental if towns such as Rochdale are to be part of the productivity change he wants to achieve. Will he, then, consider Greater Manchester’s long-held demand that the post-16 education and training budget be devolved to Greater Manchester?

**Greg Clark:** Yes, the success of the devolution arrangements in driving forward local economies has been considerable, as the hon. Gentleman, being the former Mayor, knows, and we want to see more of it. He is right to draw attention to the particular challenge—but also opportunity—of having towns within city regions place a particular focus on how they can be helped to play a bigger role in the rise in productivity now being experienced with the success of some of these devolved arrangements.

**Alan Mak** (Havant) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and for including the fourth industrial revolution as one of the key drivers of his industrial strategy policies. Will he continue to support small and medium-sized enterprises such as Havant-based 3D printing business Dream 3D, which is already using new technologies to create new jobs and improve productivity?

**Greg Clark:** I will indeed. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his tireless work in chairing the all-party group on the fourth industrial revolution and promoting the importance of embracing the new technologies of the future. He is absolutely right that there is a big opportunity for small and medium-sized businesses in particular. We have succeeded in having some of our biggest firms comprehensively embrace new technology, and the strategy points out some areas in which we can work with small and medium-sized businesses to diffuse that across the economy more generally.

**Graham Stringer** (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): The key to any successful industrial policy must be low and competitive energy costs. Energy costs in the United States have halved, and the reductions in China and India have been similar, but ours have gone up. How will the Secretary of State change that damaging trend?

**Greg Clark:** The industrial strategy is very clear and makes that precise point. We have a substantial report from Professor Dieter Helm, the energy economist, looking at how we can meet our carbon reduction commitments but at the minimum cost to consumers, whether they be domestic or industrial consumers. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will have a chance to look at the report, which we will be responding to shortly, because our ambition is as he describes: to minimise the energy costs facing businesses.

**Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): I particularly welcome the commitment in the document to local industrial strategies, especially the reference on page 226...
Mr Speaker: I had not previously been aware of the hon. Gentleman's membership of that important board, but I am now.

Greg Clark: I was aware of it, and I am delighted that my hon. Friend asks this question. There is a big opportunity for Grimsby, Cleethorpes and the surrounding area to participate in the revival that this industrial strategy offers. The board, which involves the private sector and people with a big commitment to Grimsby and the area, is featured for the particular reason that its leadership is already achieving results, and we are very keen to push that forward.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State will be aware that the best ceramics in the world are made in Stoke-on-Trent. I am partially heartened to see, on page 224 of this illustrious document, a reference to its ceramics industry. However, the Secretary of State has previously been very supportive of a sector deal, and the industry was hoping that details of it would be included in the industrial strategy, but they are not there. May I press him on that? What support can the ceramics industry expect from the British Ceramic Confederation to talk about what support we can secure now, rather than waiting for the next round of deals to be published?

Greg Clark: I share the hon. Gentleman's enthusiasm for Stoke-on-Trent and its leadership in ceramics. In fact, just last week I was talking to Laura Cohen, who leads the British Ceramics Confederation; and Abi Brown, the deputy leader of the city council, is a huge champion of the industry. As the hon. Gentleman pointed out, it features in the industrial strategy, and I think it is one of the sectors that have a stellar future. For instance, ceramics technologies can be applied to new uses in relation to medical and other devices. That is why the prospects of a sector deal are so exciting, and it has my full support and commitment.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. A number of Members on both sides of the House have mentioned the importance of collaboration. If the industrial strategy is to succeed, it will require cross-Government effort to deliver the five foundations of productivity. Will my right hon. Friend outline the measures that have been taken to ensure that the strategy is genuinely embedded across Whitehall Departments?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend has made an excellent point. Given that different industries are coming together—for example, the energy sector and the motor industry share an interest in battery storage—it makes no sense for the Government to operate in silos. Part of the purpose of the strategy is to ensure that Government policy in all the different Departments pulls in the same direction to support the industries of the future, to help them to create good jobs, and to improve the earning power of the country.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): I find myself in the unusual position of agreeing with Lord Heseltine, who suggested that the best strategy for industry in the United Kingdom might be not to leave the European Union. However, we are where we are.

The aerospace sector has experienced some difficult times recently. A great many orders have gone abroad, particularly to the United States, with no reciprocation. What will the Secretary of State do to stand up for a sector in which we have a world-leading position, given that we do not have the relationship that we should have with some of our major partners?

Greg Clark: We do stand up for the aerospace sector. It is one of the most successful sectors in terms of joint working, both with the firms in the sector and with the Government. We have a good record of working together. As for ensuring that we obtain orders in this country, there is a big role for us all to play in spelling out the benefits to other countries of products and services that are made in and provided from this country, and I hope the hon. Gentleman will join me in doing that.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): My right hon. Friend is a great ally of Teesside, and there is so much in the strategy document that is welcome, whether it relates to steel or to the Heathrow northern logistics hub. However, I want to focus briefly on carbon capture and storage. The Teesside Collective is keen to make progress on it. When will we know how we can go about bidding for the £15 million of feed funding that we are seeking?

Greg Clark: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for what he has said. I particularly commend the Mayor of Tees Valley, Ben Houchen, who was instrumental in, for instance, the proposals for the regeneration of former sites of special scientific interest that has been so well received on Teesside. I am aware that my hon. Friend initiated a successful Westminster Hall debate on this subject. As he knows, we want to get on with testing technology for carbon capture, utilisation and storage, and Teesside offers a particularly attractive environment in that because of the connections between the different users and suppliers in the area, but there needs to be a competition that can lead to an award. I know that my hon. Friend is proceeding with that, and I know that Teesside will be very well placed.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Page 218 of the White Paper shows that, after decades of economic misrule from Westminster, gross value added per hour worked in central London is 150% of the UK average, while in Wales it is only 81.4%. Therefore, a litmus test for the Secretary of State's strategy should be how it tackles geographic productivity and wealth inequalities. What benchmarks is he using to determine success or failure in addressing those challenges?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the issue. The productivity challenge that we face is about disparities. We have some of the most productive people and places in the world, but we have other places that are behind that level. The relentless focus of the industrial strategy is therefore on how we can close that gap by raising the earning power of those who are following.
He will see that Wales—its industries and training and education system—is a prime area of focus throughout the strategy. I was pleased to work with Ken Skates, the Minister in the Welsh Assembly Government, to co-ordinate our work precisely to close that gap.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I am sure the Secretary of State will agree that a key test for the industrial strategy will be how it spreads prosperity to all parts of the UK. Does he agree that a good way of doing that in Torbay would be to agree the bid for an institute of technology to be built in Paignton?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend makes another ingenious bid for the area. The history of technology in Torbay and the firms that have located there—I enjoyed meeting some of them on a visit with my hon. Friend a little while ago—provide particular reasons why it is an attractive location for such an institute.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): To improve growth and prosperity in this country, we need to ensure fair transport investment in all parts of the country. I have just received a written ministerial answer showing that the disparity in investment between the south and the north has widened since 2012. What is the Secretary of State going to do to get the Department for Transport on board with his strategy?

Greg Clark: When the hon. Lady studies the White Paper in detail, she will see that one of the proposals is to look at the dynamic effect of investments—how a transport investment can transform the prospects of an area. That can be taken into account, we propose, in making transport decisions in the future, which will be of benefit to her constituents.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I, too, welcome the drive to up productivity with its links to the clean growth strategy. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this approach to upping productivity is one of the best planks that we can put in place for continued prosperity and sustainability? Would he like to pay a visit to Taunton Deane, to look at the opportunities provided therein for some of the funding to come our way? We must not forget the south-west, and we have a great opportunity on our new Nexus business site.

Greg Clark: I would be delighted to visit my hon. Friend’s constituency. As she points out, not just in this country but all around the world economies are becoming cleaner and greener, and if we can establish leadership in the research and development and, critically, the translation of those discoveries into industrial products and processes, we can benefit substantially. We are already doing that in the offshore wind industry and others. It is a world full of opportunities for more of that, and of course the south-west has a particular role to play in that.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Secretary of State’s document rightly stresses the importance of transport infrastructure and digital infrastructure, yet when it comes to Scotland, his Government have just imposed a £600 million cut to the future rail investment programme and to date we have been underfunded in terms of superfast broadband. Will he confirm that Scotland’s funding from the £740 million digital infrastructure programme and the £400 million fund for electric vehicle charging will be allocated on need, which covers Scotland’s landmass and geography, and will not be based on arbitrary population or other measures?

Greg Clark: Of course we recognise that, and I have made the point throughout our discussions this afternoon that every place requires a consideration of its particular challenges. The geography of Scotland means that different decisions will be appropriate there compared with more urban parts of England, for example. We completely recognise that, which is why we are setting out a localist approach to ensure that we make the right investments for the right places.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State on the industrial strategy, and on announcing more investment in science and research than any Government have done in the past 40 years, particularly in advanced technologies such as quantum technologies. Anyone who wants to see gravity sensing need go no further than Chelmsford. Does he agree that investing not only in blue skies research but in near-to-market innovation is key to ensuring that bright ideas happen and stay in Britain?

Greg Clark: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. Making new discoveries is something that we have a deserved reputation for, and we must not take that for granted. We must reinforce that success. Where we have been less successful, however, is in translating those discoveries into practice and, in particular, in creating manufacturing jobs here. That is why medical manufacturing has an important role to play in the life sciences sector deal, and I am thrilled that on the basis of that industrial strategy, major investments have been announced today from the American company MSD and the German company Qigen, to reinforce the success of that important sector.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): How many pages of the Secretary of State’s strategy deal with the immense value of tidal power? It is non-carbon, it is green, it is British, it is eternal in its duration and, unlike other renewables, it is entirely predictable. Will he temper his manic enthusiasm and optimism by reading the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee reports on Hinkley Point, which say that it will cost us £30 billion in subsidies that will be paid for by the poorest consumers?

Greg Clark: I am not going to temper my enthusiasm; quite the opposite, in fact. We have many opportunities in clean energy, with many breakthroughs in prospect. As was pointed out earlier, we have to ensure that the cost to consumers is taken into account, and that is the judgment that we need to make when it comes to projects such as the one the hon. Gentleman has just described.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): The Secretary of State is welcome to come and talk industrial strategy in Worcestershire any time. Can he confirm that the industrial strategy is intended not to be a 254-page document that will sit on a shelf gathering dust but a
deliberate statement of strategic intent and policy that will change over time? Will he tell me how it will be refreshed and changed?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The purpose of the strategy is not just to inform the decisions taken by Government Departments—although it is important that they should be consistent with it—but to give confidence to investors so that they can predict the direction of policy. We have seen that today in the life sciences sector. It is important that the strategy is kept refreshed and up to date, and one of the proposals in the paper is to establish an industrial strategy council, which will be an independent body that can report to the House and others on progress and ensure that we are agile enough to keep up with developments in technology.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): As the Secretary of State knows, the Vauxhall car plant in my constituency is facing a huge challenge for its survival, so the focus on the supply chain in the automotive sector, on page 202 of the strategy, is to be welcomed. In order to be a success, however, we will need more than good intentions. Will he tell us what financial incentives will be available to encourage suppliers to relocate to the UK?

Greg Clark: Part of the sector deal with the automotive sector will do precisely what the hon. Gentleman suggests—that is, look at the supply chain and create opportunities, backed by the industry and the Government working together, to make it easier for suppliers, including small suppliers, to locate in this country. He is bang on the money: that is what was proposed by the sector and it has been agreed in the sector deal. That shows the value of this strategic approach, with the Government and the sector working together to address some of the known opportunities.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): From speaking to businesses and investors, Brexit is of course driving some uncertainty, but when they speak frankly, they say that their greatest fear is a hard-left Labour Government and the investment-destroying, punitive taxation that would come with them. What role is played in the industrial strategy by low, simple taxes and by great incentives, such as the world-class research and development expenditure credits?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Everyone should be seeking to build confidence in the UK economy. We make it clear in the industrial strategy that some of the UK economy’s strengths are that we are an attractive place for business to locate, which is why we are one of the biggest places for inward investment around the world, that we create more new businesses than any other country, that we are a competitive place with no sheltering for incumbents, and that we are a place of low taxes in which enterprise is rewarded. Those things are foundational to our success, and I cannot understand why any party would want to set itself against that.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): The Secretary of State has already praised the wonderful ceramics industry, which has its home in Stoke-on-Trent, and the work done by the British Ceramic Confederation for the past two years on developing an industrial strategy. It is great to see a photo of my sector on page 224 of the White Paper, but we really need a strategy for Stoke-on-Trent, so will the Secretary of State meet me and my colleagues on the all-party parliamentary group for ceramics, which I chair, to discuss how we can move that forwards and develop what my constituency and city so desperately need?

Greg Clark: I am always keen to meet people from the ceramics industry and from Stoke-on-Trent and the surrounding area. It is a fantastic industry for the future as well as the present—great strides are being made. It is an endorsement of the approach in the Green Paper of asking whether we should have sector deals that there was such an emphatic yes that some sectors, including ceramics, submitted their own proposals, and I am keen to take them forward.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I am sure that the Secretary of State is aware that I chair the all-party parliamentary group for the coalfield communities—if he was not, he is now—and the group has done significant work on trying to look at the regeneration of such communities. In relation to the White Paper, how does he intend to bring jobs and investment to those communities, which have suffered over successive generations in terms of job losses, economic growth and, indeed, health outcomes?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. The White Paper contains a substantial section on the importance of local places and the role they can play in reviving their economies. It looks in particular at establishing local industrial strategies that are not only about the big cities, but about smaller towns and communities. The strategy presents an opportunity to former coalfield communities and others to play a big role in helping to drive up their future prospects.
Points of Order

5.3 pm

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. There is a flurry of points of order—the insatiable curiosity of Members knows no bounds. I call Dr Julian Lewis.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You will recall that I raised a point of order on 23 October about the fact that the new National Security Adviser, Mark Sedwill, had declined to give evidence to the Select Committee on Defence about the ongoing capability review, saying that that was a matter for the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy. Mr Speaker, you will have seen from Defence questions—others may have seen this from a major article in The Daily Telegraph today—how crucial the capability review is for defence, even though Mark Sedwill said in his letter declining to come to the Defence Committee:

“Because the main decisions on defence were taken during the 2015 SDSR, this review is not defence-focused.”

I beg to differ. Given that the then National Security Adviser, Kim Darroch, and his deputy, Julian Miller, gave oral evidence to the Defence Committee on 11 September 2013, what powers does the Committee have to instruct relevant witnesses to appear before us when both the substance of the matter and the precedent are in favour of our wishing to take evidence from a witness such as the National Security Adviser?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order, of the detailed content of which I had no advance knowledge. However, I make no complaint about that whatsoever.

I listened carefully to what the right hon. Gentleman said, and I would respond as follows. First, in my judgment, it is not principally for Mr Sedwill to be the judge of which Committee has competence—I use the term “competence” in the technical sense—in respect of this matter, or indeed to conclude that only one Committee is involved. That is a matter about which other people will have a view, not least parliamentarians. I would very politely suggest to the National Security Adviser that he should be sensitive to the views of senior colleagues.

Secondly, it is a matter of established fact—not least testified to by the exchanges at Defence questions this afternoon—that questions relating to the subject matter that the right hon. Gentleman describes are in order. If such questions were not in order, they would not have been accepted as oral questions by the Table Office, but they were in order, and therefore so were supplementary questions appertaining to those tabled questions. That therefore gives the matters a relevance that the National Security Adviser, with the very greatest of respect, is in no position to deny. Thirdly, I would say it is a well-established principle that if a Select Committee requests that a witness gives evidence, in almost every case that potential witness accedes to that request.

Finally, I simply say to the right hon. Gentleman—I do not know whether it is relevant in this case—that I know of an instance in which a potential witness indicated that he did not believe he had much to say that would add to the deliberations of the Committee in question. However, he was advised that, whether or not he thought that what he had to say would greatly assist the deliberations of the Committee, the Committee nevertheless wished to hear him. It might even have been the case that Committee members wanted to say things to him, almost irrespective of whether he wanted to say things to them.

All in all, I therefore think there is a compelling case on this matter. There are powers available to Committees to report a refusal to appear to the House, and thereafter the matter can be escalated. I very politely suggest that it would be highly undesirable for such a procedure to be needed in this case.

In the light of all those considerations, I hope the right hon. Gentleman’s efforts to secure the attendance of the National Security Adviser will now bear fruit. Moreover, I have known the right hon. Gentleman for 34 years as of last month, and while I am sure that the National Security Adviser is an extremely formidable fellow, I would say to him, through the right hon. Gentleman and through the medium of the House, “Give up the unequal struggle and just appear.”

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op) rose—

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your advice on correcting the record. I gave a speech in the Budget debate on Thursday in which I stated that the Foxhill housing development in my constituency delivers no change in the number of homes for social rent. However, I misspoke; the fact is there will be a loss of 99 homes for social rent. I also seek your advice on how to receive confirmation from the Government that reducing the number of homes for social rent in Bath, or in any city, is in line with Government policy, as it appears in a letter I received from the Minister for Housing and Planning on 2 November 2017?

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for giving me notice that she planned to raise this matter. As she concluded her effort to do so, there was, if I may say so, a puckish grin on her face, as I think her attempts on this occasion have been mildly cheeky—I put it no more strongly than that.

The hon. Lady said that she wanted to put the record straight. In so far as she was seeking to do so, she has now done so, and it is there for the people of Bath and the organs of popular dissemination in Bath, namely the media, to see that she has done so. Colleagues will have noticed her prodigious efforts to do so.

On the matter of seeking either my advice or a ministerial confirmation, I have to say that this seems to me to be more a point of argument than a point of order for the Chair. However, I can advise her that a number of avenues are open to her if she wishes to press the Government on this matter. My particular advice to the hon. Lady, who is a new Member and an exceptionally assiduous one, is that she should toddle the very short distance from the Chamber to the Table Office, where she can seek the advice of the officials therein on which of those possible avenues might be thought to be the most profitable.
Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. As he says, publication to the Select Committee has taken place today. I had anticipated that it would, because obviously conversations about this matter took place between the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union and the Chair of the Brexit Committee, the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), and conversations took place that included me. I had expected that the analyses would be released no later than today and am pleased that that has happened.

I note what the hon. Gentleman says about the extent of the interest in the matters covered by the sectoral analyses. My response is to say to him that publication is to the Committee and the matter is in the hands of the Committee. It is perfectly open to the hon. Gentleman—and, indeed, to other Members similarly interested—to approach the Chair of the Select Committee and to seek disclosure. I must emphasise, however, that at this stage it is very much a matter for the Chair of the Committee, although an approach to him is in no way improper—indeed, not least on the back of this point of order, it is very much to be expected. The right hon. Member for Leeds Central is a very experienced Member of this House, as well as an unfailingly courteous one, and I rather doubt that he would be surprised to be so approached.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman is not hailing a taxi, but nevertheless I am happy to hear his point of order.

Tom Brake: Mr Speaker, you are clearly someone with great experience of the procedures in this House. Do you feel that there would be a public interest defence if the Chair of the Select Committee decided to make the information available to Members of the House generally so that we could all access the reports?

Mr Speaker: I am slightly taken aback by the right hon. Gentleman’s inquiry. My response is that the need for a public interest defence, as he put it, would not arise because publication would be covered by parliamentary privilege. In the event of disclosure and there being a disagreement about the wisdom of that disclosure between Members, between the Executive and the legislature, or between the Executive and parts of the legislature, there could indeed be argument, and the Chair of the Committee or his colleagues—or both—could be open to criticism, but no need for a public interest defence would arise. I hope that that is helpful to colleagues.
Universal Credit
(Application, Advice and Assistance)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

5.17 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to reform the Universal Credit application process; to make provision about advice and assistance for claimants; and arrangements for payments; and for connected purposes.

I welcome the Chancellor’s removal of the arbitrary seven waiting days, which reduces the waiting time to five weeks, but the Department for Work and Pensions’ own data shows that a quarter of all claimants are currently waiting longer than six weeks. If universal credit is paid monthly because it is meant to be like a salary, surely the maximum waiting time should be a month. If the DWP cannot deliver that, the roll-out of universal credit should be paused. It must be recognised that 58% of universal credit claimants are paid fortnightly or weekly and therefore do not have a monthly salary to see them through the waiting time. Many work on zero-hours or low-hours contracts and are unlikely to have any savings to fall back on. The impact has been demonstrated by the Trussell Trust’s report of a 30% surge in the use of food banks in universal credit roll-out areas.

Universal credit arrived in my constituency on Budget day—last Wednesday. That means that many of my constituents will be facing weeks five and six at Christmas and new year. It means that they will go into the festive season and the hardest part of the winter without having received their universal credit. I welcome the increase in the advance loans to 100% of entitlement, but I have to ask why, if that can be worked out so quickly, it takes so long to deliver universal credit. I also welcome the fact that the payback has been stretched to a year, but it is important that claimants do not have to jump through hoops and that that is the routine time, so that paying back advanced loans does not generate further financial stress.

The Bill proposes that the Government follow the options that will be available from the Scottish Government in the form of twice-monthly and direct landlord payments. Claimants should not have to jump through hoops for those; they should simply be able to choose their option, because they best understand their own circumstances.

The Bill is an attempt to solve some of the administrative problems, particularly the fact that the circumstances in which a claimant lives are taken into account only on the one assessment day every month, with changes applied to the entire month regardless of how short a time they actually apply. If a child left home the day before assessment day, it would therefore be assumed that they had not been there for the whole month, meaning that the benefits would be reduced. Claimants complete their logbooks online. Computers have calculators, so how hard is it to work out to what proportion of the month changes of circumstances apply?

Similarly, self-employed people face a minimum income floor of more than £1,100. If they earn more, their universal credit is reduced, but if they earn less, it is not increased. Such an approach does not take account of the variability of many self-employed professions, the drop in people’s income if they choose to have a short holiday with their family in the summer, or the effect of the four extra public holidays at Christmas and new year.

There is a need to find a replacement for the award letter to give a detailed breakdown of universal credit components. Some banks have been advised by their risk departments not to lend against universal credit at all. Many working people will now be receiving tax credits through universal credit, but that income may not be counted towards getting a mortgage. Those who are looking for loans may also be refused, and that could drive them into the arms of payday lenders and loan sharks. Trying to tackle this matter could also help to re-establish automatic passporting to other benefits, particularly free school meals. North Ayrshire Council in my constituency automatically registers children for free school meals both to reduce stigma and to ensure that children do not miss out. It is important that we do not lose that advantage.

The Bill calls on the Government to make separate payments the norm. It is often said that universal credit should be like a salary, but salaries are paid to individuals, and it is quite Victorian to go back to the idea of the breadwinner. I certainly would not be too chuffed if my salary were posted to my husband. To be serious, however, financial control is usually the first level of abuse. A survey of 4,000 people showed that one in five had faced financial control or abuse. Although those people are not all women, 88% were women in relationships, which means that they are the vast majority. A women with no money in her purse at all very quickly becomes isolated from her friends or from any support network because she simply cannot afford to go for a coffee. She feels embarrassed, she starts to withdraw and she ends up isolated. More than half of all women in abusive or violent relationships cite lack of money as their reason for not leaving. No woman should have to choose between poverty and abuse.

The Bill calls for both a cumulative and an equality impact assessment of all the welfare changes over the past five years to be carried out and then published. The biggest loss of income is due to the benefit freeze, the two-child limit and the bedroom tax, but the issues involved in universal credit are compounding the problem. This Bill seeks to find pragmatic solutions. It must not be forgotten that poverty is the biggest driver of physical and mental ill health. It has the greatest impact on children because they find it hard to study when they are cold and hungry. Poverty can blight their lives, ruin their educational chances and reduce their chances of a good job in the future. Instead of ending up spending money on blighted lives in the criminal justice system, dealing with drug addiction or paying benefits to those children, we should invest in them now. There was broad agreement on the policy of universal credit, but we need to fix the reality so that universal credit becomes a flexible and supportive benefit that helps people back to work, but does not punish them for the situation they find themselves in.

I call on the Minister to listen to charities, local authorities and MPs right across this House. It is important that the Government recognise that universal credit is flawed and they need to fix it now.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,
Ways and Means

Budget Resolutions

INCOME TAX (CHARGE)

Debate resumed (Order, 23 November).

Question again proposed,

That income tax is charged for the tax year 2018-19.

And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

5.26 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): I know that the whole House will join me in sending our warmest congratulations to Prince Harry of Wales and Meghan Markle on the announcement of a union that will make the royal family even more global, and Britain more global than ever before.

I am delighted to open the Budget debate. The driving purpose of this Government is to strengthen Britain’s global role, to raise our level of national ambition and to prepare for the opportunities before us when this country regains the power to decide our trade policy and strike our own trade deals. As that moment approaches, the House should focus on the salient fact that 80% of the global economy and 90% of world economic growth lies outside of the European Union. The countries of Asia and the middle east have been increasing their relative weight in the global economy for decades, so that the great arteries of world trade are thousands of miles from our continent. Every day, fleets of supertankers carrying 17 million barrels of oil ply the strait of Hormuz, and a quarter of the world’s maritime trade passes through the strait of Malacka in south-east Asia.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op) rose—

Boris Johnson: As I am sure the hon. Gentleman is about to remind us, we are going to create a new, deep and special partnership with our friends and partners in the EU, but Britain is uniquely placed to thrive and prosper in a globalised economy.

Mike Gapes: Given that even the Foreign Secretary does not have the power to change geography, what is he going to do to relocate the United Kingdom from Europe—being linked to the European land mass—to south-east Asia or the middle of the Pacific?

Boris Johnson: I think that most hon. Members who are listening to the exordium of my speech will appreciate that that is an entirely ludicrous question, since I pointed out, just as the hon. Gentleman rose to his feet, that we are going to make a new, deep and special partnership with our friends in the European Union in addition to the exciting growth opportunities that await us around the world. By history and by instinct, Britain is an outward-looking and free-trading nation, and all we need to flourish is the determination to grasp the opportunities around us. This Budget is designed to equip a global Britain for that challenge.
Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): In terms of grasping opportunities, does my right hon. Friend acknowledge that one in 12 people on this planet is an Indian under the age of 28? Does he agree that that is where the future lies, that is where the opportunities for this country lie and that we can forge a trade relationship with those people only outside the customs union?

Boris Johnson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I might point out to him as well that India is just one of 52 Commonwealth nations that together comprise 2.4 billion people and some of the fastest-growing economies in the world, with whom we can now do free trade deals, as he rightly says, outside the customs union. We will be strengthened in that endeavour by being able to build on the success—

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Will the Foreign Secretary give way?

Boris Johnson: I will give way in a moment, as I am sure the right hon. Gentleman will want to hear these points.

We will be able to build on the success of an economy that has grown for 19 quarters in a row, contrary to what the right hon. Gentleman prophesied, with unemployment that has fallen to its lowest level for 42 years and with 3 million new jobs since 2010—one of the best records in the whole of Europe—and we are forecast to create another 600,000 by 2020.

This Budget will take forward our national success by helping Britain to compete in the industries of the future—robotics, artificial intelligence and self-driving cars. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor is overseeing the biggest increase in science and innovation spending for 40 years, investing another £2.3 billion to keep Britain at the forefront of the technological revolution.

Tom Brake: On the subject of something the Foreign Secretary can realistically achieve in the Budget, will he set out for the House when he is going to deliver on his promise of £350 million a week for the NHS—[Interruption.] They do not like hearing it, do they?

Boris Johnson: With pleasure. As the right hon. Gentleman knows full well, when we leave the European Union, there will be at least £350 million a week, of which we will take back control. As he knows full well, substantial sums from that funding will be available for use in our national health service. If he seriously believes that money should be squandered on ill-audited projects across Europe, he is not expressing the will of the British people.

Several hon. Members rose—

Boris Johnson: If I may, I will make a little more progress.

The right hon. Gentleman will be pleased to know that a new tech business is being created in Britain every hour, and we are dedicating another £500 million to initiatives ranging from 5G mobile communications to full fibre broadband networks.

This Budget presses on with the most ambitious renewal of our national infrastructure in living memory, including the biggest programme of improvements to our road network since the 1970s and the biggest expansion of our railways since Victorian times, with Crossrail comprising the largest construction project in Europe, to say nothing of High Speed 2, the second biggest.

But we cannot prosper at home unless Britain plays our indispensable role in maintaining the stability and security of the world. It is the right thing to do, but it also means that global Britain is of direct benefit to all our constituents. Millions of British jobs depend on the benign and transformative power of free trade. Last year, we sold goods and services worth almost £100 billion to the United States. Our exports rely, therefore, on other countries being rich and peaceful enough to buy our British products.

When the Department for International Development invests £4 billion in development in Africa, we do this, and we are proud to do this, because it is right in itself and also because 70% of Africans are under the age of 25, the population of their continent is set to double to 2.4 billion by 2050, and these are the great markets of the future.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): Last week I returned from the border of Bangladesh and Myanmar, where I heard of unspeakable crimes being committed against the Rohingya people. At this crucial time, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has had its budget slashed, and I am worried about the effect this will have on our ability to prevent future crimes against humanity. I would like to share my findings with the Secretary of State, so will he kindly agree to meet me to discuss the evidence of genocide in Myanmar?

Boris Johnson: I must, I am afraid, correct the hon. Lady. The budget of the Foreign Office is rising from £1.2 billion to £1.24 billion, and including our ODA—official development assistance—spending, it is going to be well over £2 billion every year. There has been no cut in Foreign Office spending whatever; I am afraid that is absolutely untrue. We are seeing our spending increased rather than the reverse. I have had the opportunity to discuss the crisis in Rakhine and the plight of the Rohingyas not just with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development, who was there at the weekend, but with many hon. Friends across the House.

Dr Allin-Khan: Will the Foreign Secretary meet me?

Boris Johnson: May I invite the hon. Lady to write to me about the matter and I will certainly do my best to give her a full answer? [Interruption.] I am afraid that, as she can imagine, my diary is very heavily congested. [Interruption.] She importunes me for a meeting. It would be wrong of me—[Interruption.]
The reason the UK is one of the biggest donors to Bangladesh and to the solution of the crisis in Rakhine is that Burma, one day, will have a great future and we—our country—will be part of that future. When our soldiers and development experts are deployed in northern Nigeria—I have seen for myself the great work that they do—to help defeat the barbaric terrorists of Boko Haram, they are also helping to bring stability to a country rich in natural resources that will, by the middle of the century, have more people than the United States. When we strive to get girls into school in Pakistan, to unite the world behind Ghassan Salamé’s plan for a peaceful Libya, to improve the resilience of Bangladesh to flooding, to help Kenya to beat corruption, or to help tackle the problems of Somalia—all areas in which the UK, global Britain, is in the lead—we are doing the right thing for the world, but we are also investing in countries with huge potential, filled with the consumers of the future.

Our exports rely on shipping lanes and clear international rules enforced with rigour and fairness. We will not be so foolhardy as the Leader of the Opposition, who apparently believes that all this can be taken for granted so foolhardy as the Leader of the Opposition, who

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): I am concerned that the Foreign Secretary might be moving on from the aid budget without mentioning a very good project that we are involved in—a finance initiative for women entrepreneurs that is helping women in the developing world to set up businesses, not only providing security and stability but enabling them in future to become trading partners with us.

Boris Johnson: As the hon. Gentleman knows full well, we are one of the few countries in Europe, or indeed in the world, committed to spending 2% of our GDP on defence. We are increasing our defence spending year on year, as the Chancellor confirmed in this Budget.

We are demonstrating our commitment by deeds as well as words. At this moment, Britain is providing almost a quarter of the troops in NATO’s “enhanced forward presence” in the Baltic states and Poland. I visited them in September, and I suggest that the hon. Gentleman does likewise. He will see a battalion of 800 personnel in Estonia, and it will make him proud. It was extraordinary to see the gratitude of the Government and the people of Estonia, because they see what Conservative Members understand: the people of Tallinn, Riga, Warsaw and Vilnius enjoy just as much protection from NATO as the residents of Berlin, Paris or London. It is right that they do, and they have an equal right to live in peace and freedom.

I say again that not only is a global Britain in our national interest, but we have an obligation to promote the general good. It is an astonishing fact that, when we include our overseas territories, this country is responsible—in addition to all the other aspects of global Britain that I have described—for 2.6 million square miles of ocean. That area is more than twice the size of India and 30 times bigger than the UK. Britain is responsible for a greater expanse of the world’s oceans than are Brazil, Canada or even China. It is possible that some hon. Members are unaware that one third of the world’s emperor penguins are British.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): As we are

Boris Johnson: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave a moment or two ago in respect of the colossal investments that the Government and the country are making in our defence and armed services, of all kinds. We are spending 2.2% of GDP on defence, and very few other countries can match that record. I do not know whether my hon. Friend has noticed, but this country has only recently commissioned two of the biggest warships—each of them is longer than the Palace of Westminster—that this country has ever produced, which is a demonstration of our commitment to the Royal Navy.

Several hon. Members rose—

Boris Johnson: I will, if I may, complete my point about the penguins. The penguins have their British status by virtue of their residence in the British Antarctic Territory. We have the fifth biggest maritime estate in the world, giving us a special role in conserving the biodiversity of our seas.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): Will the Foreign Secretary give way?

Boris Johnson: I think I know what my hon. Friend is going to say, and I will happily give way to him on this point.

James Gray: My right hon. Friend is making some extremely important points, particularly about the Antarctic and the Southern ocean. Will he commit the Government
to paying particular attention to marine protected areas around the Antarctic coast, which I think he strongly espouses, as do close relations of his?

**Boris Johnson:** My hon. Friend brilliantly anticipates the point I was going to make. As he rightly guesses, the Government’s policy is to encircle or, I should say, to engirdle the planet with a blue belt of marine protected areas embracing 1.5 million square miles of ocean by 2020.

**James Gray:** Brilliant.

**Boris Johnson:** Thank you.

The House will know that the careless disposal of plastic waste poses one of the gravest threats to marine life. That potentially lethal material, which is carried by the currents, is choking seabirds and imperilling whales. In 2015, the Government introduced a charge on plastic carrier bags, cutting their use in the UK by 80%, and avoiding the disposal of 9 billion carrier bags, many of which might otherwise have ended up in the oceans. From 1 January, we will ban the production of plastic microbeads, the strongest legal measure of its kind anywhere in the world. This Budget goes further by asking for evidence on how the Government could take more such steps, through new taxes and charges, to combat the menace of marine plastic pollution. That is because Britain’s ambitions must be global, as befits our responsibilities, history and tradition.

A global Britain is a safer Britain and a more prosperous Britain. It is profoundly in our interests that we should play the role of helping to guarantee the safety of countries far from our shores—

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Boris Johnson:** With great respect, I will not give way.

As well as taking such actions, we should invest in the development of nations that may be poor today, but will be thriving markets for British exports. I venture to say not just that such an outcome will be good for those countries or for our country, but that the fruits of such investment by a global Britain will be good for the world. I commend this Budget to the House.

5.48 pm

**Emily Thornberry** (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I am delighted to join the Foreign Secretary in congratulating Prince Henry of Wales and Meghan Markle on their forthcoming marriage. However, I was disappointed that the Foreign Secretary did not feel it appropriate to acknowledge a recent sad event. I want to ensure that all of us in the House join in sending our thoughts to the families of all of the hundreds killed, including 27 children, and injured in Friday’s horrific terrorist attack on al-Rawda mosque in north Sinai. It is a brutal reminder that by far the biggest targets and the highest number of victims of jihadi terrorists are people of the Muslim faith, and that the inhuman evil that is Daesh, which worships no gods but death and publicity, must be wiped from the face of the earth.

For reasons lost in the past, Budget debates have often been the occasion for some degree of light-hearted exchange over the years. However, not least in the light of the events in Egypt and the serious situation in which we currently find ourselves as a country economically, diplomatically and militarily, I do not believe that levity is in order today. Especially when it comes to the Foreign Secretary, all the jokes have worn just a bit thin of late.

I am nevertheless glad that the Foreign Secretary is leading today’s debate. Back in March he acknowledged how rare that was, because never under David Cameron’s Government did a Foreign Secretary lead a Budget debate. In the first two Budgets under the new Prime Minister and Chancellor, however, the Foreign Secretary has been given that honour. Perhaps this is their way of dipping his hands in the blood, as the economic impact of his Brexit plan becomes ever clearer, or perhaps, to be slightly less Shakespearian, it is their way of rubbing the nose of a wild, carefree puppy in the mess he has made.

**Sir Hugo Swire** (East Devon) (Con): Will the right hon. Lady join me and the rest of the House in welcoming the announcement of two major pharmaceutical investments in the UK?

**Emily Thornberry:** Of course I welcome that, but I am concerned that we still have no answer from the Government on what will happen to the European body that currently regulates pharmaceutical trade across Europe. With no answer on that, it is difficult to be able to look at a long-term plan in that regard.

I was talking about the mess. We saw that mess last week in the Office for Budget Responsibility’s latest projections. Growth in the UK, which was already projected to be the lowest of all major economies, has now been cut again, in one of the biggest downgrades in our economic history. The truth is that it could be much worse. Let us face the reality. The OBR’s forecasts last week were still based on an optimistic assumption of Brexit.

The OBR said:

“Given the legal requirement for the OBR to produce its forecasts on the basis of current Government policy, we once again asked the Government to provide us with any detail on post-EU exit UK policies in relation to trade, migration and EU finances.”

Let us note two points about the OBR’s language, because Robert Chote is not one to use his words loosely. He said that he had “once again” asked the Treasury for its Brexit plan—presumably, he has been making that request for many months now. What he asked for was very simple but very shocking: he asked the Treasury for “any detail” about its plan. What did the Treasury do in response? According to the OBR, the Treasury sent it a copy of the Prime Minister’s Florence speech. How utterly pathetic. That was followed up with a bunch of documents full of aspirations and pipe dreams, with no detail and of no practical worth.

The OBR was left to conclude:

“We were not provided with any information that is not in the public domain.”

In other words, the organisation whose legal responsibility it is to forecast the future state of the British economy asked the Government what their plan was for Brexit and was treated just as dismissively as every Member of this House has been treated for the past 17 months. As a result, the OBR concluded:

“Given the uncertainty regarding how the Government will respond to the choices and trade-offs it faces during the negotiations, we still have no meaningful basis on which to form a judgment as to the final outcome and upon which we can then condition our forecast”.


Seventeen months on from the referendum, the OBR still has “no meaningful basis” on which to make a forecast about what Brexit will mean, either because the Government refuse to tell them, or because the Government cannot decide what kind of Brexit they want.

However, let us be absolutely clear about one thing: as dreadful as the OBR’s forecast for growth and the public finances is, it still assumes that there will be a deal on future trading arrangements between Britain and the EU. It has not even attempted to look at the consequences of a no-deal outcome on trade, employment and growth. Therefore, when the Economic Secretary to the Treasury responds at the end of the debate, will he address one specific question? The Government have said that they will conduct precautionary preparations for the prospect of a no-deal, cliff-edge Brexit. Can he please reassure the House that, as part of those preparations, the OBR will be asked to assess the likely economic and fiscal impact and to publish that paper as soon as possible, so that Parliament and the British public can fully understand the costs of that scenario?

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Emily Thornberry: I will of course give way to the right hon. Gentleman, but I wonder whether we could do it this way: if he has a question for me, I have a question for him. Of the 32 taxes listed in the Red Book’s table of current receipts, which one is forecast to take in less money year on year over the next six years?

Mr Duncan Smith: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Emily Thornberry: I am not going to.

Emily Thornberry: The table on page 82 shows that only one of the 32 taxes listed will fall, and that is the bank levy. That tells us all we need to know about the Government’s priorities in the Budget.

As for what the Government’s plans are and what they are doing to the country, let me turn to the substance of the Budget and today’s theme of global Britain. In recent years the Treasury has taken great pleasure in writing a section of the Red Book entitled “The Global Economy”, which is usually used to trumpet the fact that Britain’s economy was the envy of the western world.

Mr Duncan Smith: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Emily Thornberry: I am not going to.

In 2016 that section of the Red Book ran to a full 10 paragraphs, beginning with the boast that: “Britain is forecast to grow faster than any other major advanced economy”.

Well, what a difference a year makes. Now that section runs to just one measly paragraph, on page 13, and it does not state how much Britain will grow compared with the rest of the world. For that comparison, we must turn to the OBR, which has stated: “The pattern of strengthening growth across the other major advanced economies this year contrasts with the slower pace of growth in the UK.”

While it has slashed its forecast for UK growth up to 2022, it has upgraded its forecast for the rest of the world. George Osborne used to boast in every Budget that Britain was winning “the global race.” We now have a Government lagging along at the back of the global field and falling ever further behind. So much for global Britain.

If anyone thinks that growth figures are just numbers on a spreadsheet with no real-world implications, they should turn to two areas where the downgrading of Britain’s growth is already having direct and immediate effects: our spending on defence and on development.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Is my right hon. Friend aware that in the past 35 minutes the Secretary of State for Exiting the EU has written to the Select Committee to say that the reports being provided are not complete and do not actually contain anything that might be commercially sensitive, thus adding very strongly to the point she is making? The Government are taking on the most significant economic challenge the country has faced since the second world war without a modicum of the basic detail they need to take on the task. Does it not shame the Government and Parliament that we are facing this kind of catastrophe without any serious information?

Emily Thornberry: My hon. Friend makes a very serious and important point. It is a shame that such an important and serious contribution is met by laughter on the Government Benches.

Let me turn to defence. It is not often that I find myself in agreement with the right hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) and for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), but I absolutely agree with them that the Government’s proposals to reduce the size of our Army to below the 70,000 mark, a cut of 12,000 from current
plans, is nothing short of a scandal. Nor would it be acceptable to cut still further our naval capabilities by taking the amphibious ships, HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark, out of service.

We all heard the International Trade Secretary say yesterday that the Government would attempt to reach “some sort of compromise” on these cuts. Well, I have to say to the Government that there is no basis for compromise here. We should not even be having this discussion. Our armed forces are stretched to the limit as it is and they cannot take another round of cuts, so when we hear from the City Minister later on this, who himself served with such distinction as a young man in the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers, I hope he will make it clear, on behalf of the Treasury, that there will be no cuts in the size of the Army and no cuts in the Navy’s amphibious assault ships.

**Sir Edward Leigh:** I have already made my point about the armed forces, and in that sense I agree with the right hon. Lady. But does she not realise that the cost of the national debt in interest alone is the equivalent every year of 10 Queen Elizabeth aircraft carriers? I am sure she would agree with me that the way to solve the problems with the MOD budget is not to increase the national debt.

**Emily Thornberry:** The national debt, as I understand it, has more than doubled under this Government, so we take no lessons from them. Surely it is important to borrow to invest in order to grow our economy. It is, essentially, a different attitude to economics.

Let us hope the Minister goes further and corrects one major omission from the Budget on the issue of spending. On the Labour Benches, we welcomed last week’s guarantee that the increase in nurses’ pay would be funded through additional money from the Treasury with no cuts elsewhere to the NHS budget. We will hold the Government to that guarantee. Can we have the same assurances over the much needed and long-overdue increases in pay for our armed forces? It would be entirely wrong and self-defeating if those increases were to be paid for by further cuts in personnel, equipment or living conditions, so I hope the City Minister will be able to give us an assurance on that.

**Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend believe that the Government are doing enough, as set out in the Budget, to tackle tax avoiders and tax evaders, some of whom are resident in British overseas territories and dependencies, to ensure that the Treasury has enough resource to pay nurses and others?

**Emily Thornberry:** My hon. Friend makes a very important point. Studies have been made, have they not, of the amount that each tax inspector can bring in to HMRC? Cutting back on the number of people is simply counterproductive.

**Dr Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con) **rose**—

**Emily Thornberry:** I will give way to the Chair of the Defence Committee.

**Dr Lewis:** In the past, it has been possible to make common cause between the Government and Labour Benches on the need to secure the future of the nuclear deterrent. Can we now make common cause on a recognition that the bare minimum of 2% of GDP is simply not enough, bearing in mind the fact that for several years after the cold war, in 1995-96, after we had taken the peace dividend, we were still spending 3%, not 2%, of GDP on defence?

**Emily Thornberry:** I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that question and I will come on to answer it if he will give me a moment.

Beside the specific proposals, there is a wider point of principle on defence spending, which takes us back to the question of falling growth. We on the Labour Benches have long argued that the way the Government meet the target to spend 2% of GDP on defence is wholly inadequate. Defence spending should mean spending on defence, not on Ministry of Defence pensions, as the right hon. Gentleman and the Select Committee have pointed out, or on any other items that the Government simply lump in to meet the target. We need to ensure, at a time when growth is being downgraded—we are dangerously close to a period of falling GDP—that the Government do not use that as an excuse to cut the armed forces budget, in effect treating the 2% figure not as a target but as a cap. If anyone thinks that is a fictional risk, let us take a look at the budget for international development.

I am told this is different but I believe it is not. The Budget speech in March this year was one of the first I can recall since coming to this House, under Chancellors from different parties, that made no mention of international development and our obligations to the poorest in the world. I believed at the time that it was a temporary aberration, but sadly it happened again last week. This time, the omission was far more serious. Say what you like about George Osborne—and I am sure the Foreign Secretary frequently does—at least when he used to cut the international development budget and keep it capped at 0.7% of GDP, he would stand in front of this House and announce that decision publicly. It is a disgrace, by contrast, that the Chancellor last week chose to cut £900 million from the overseas aid budget over the next two years but did not think it worth mentioning in his speech, let alone detailing exactly which projects and programmes will be cut in the world’s poorest countries as a result of the Government’s failure on growth.

**Sir Hugo Swire:** Will the right hon. Lady give way?

**Emily Thornberry:** I gave way to the right hon. Gentleman once before. I am sure he will be able to cover any points he wants to make in his speech.

Across the world, this is a precarious time for investment in international development. The US Congress is battling to limit Donald Trump’s proposed cuts to foreign aid and the global fight against malaria, but still the only question is the size of the eventual cuts, not whether they will go ahead. Closer to home, the EU’s proposed 2018 budget includes a 6% cut in development spending, a cut that dwarfs any proposed increase in spending on humanitarian aid.
Ms Ghani: I am a little bit concerned that the right hon. Lady might be misleading the House. The 0.7% figure is enshrined in law, and surely she recognises the extra funding placed on the World Service and the British Council, which does a huge amount of work on human rights and education, and deals with some of the trickiest countries around the world. We should not dismiss this country’s commitment to international development.

Emily Thornberry: I simply refer the hon. Lady to the Red Book, where she will see that there is less money being spent on international development. It is a great worry to us all and I know it will be a great worry to her. I therefore hope she will join us in speaking to the Chancellor about our responsibilities, because we are at a time of great difficulty internationally. As I have been attempting to outline, there are cuts not only from the United States but the EU. If we are, in effect, spending less money, too, at such a precarious time, that should cause us all concern. It was extraordinary that the Chancellor of the Exchequer chose not to mention it at all in his speech.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that what the Government and the Conservative party do not recognise is that the commitment is to 0.7% of GDP, so when GDP falls, as we learned it did in the Budget, the amount of money going to international aid also falls? The Chancellor should have made that clear last week.

Emily Thornberry: So in conclusion, here we are debating Britain’s place in the world, in respect of a Budget that could not bring itself to mention how we are ranked globally on growth; here we are debating defence, in respect of a Budget that did not once mention defence spending or armed forces pay or disclose the Government’s secret plans to cut the size of our Army to below 70,000; here we are debating international development, in respect of a Budget that is scandalously silent on the issue, even while raiding almost £1 billion from its budget.

If that is what the Government mean by “global Britain”, I would hate to see their vision of isolation. We might see it soon enough, however, because there is one thing that sums up the Budget and the giant mess the Government have got us into: the great flourish with which the Chancellor turned, for approval, to the Foreign Secretary and announced that he would be spending £3.7 billion on preparing for a no deal Brexit—£3.7 billion of taxpayers’ money just to prepare for failure. That is exactly 100 times what the Foreign Secretary wasted on his ludicrous vanity project, the garden bridge, and 110 times what the Chancellor set aside to help the NHS cope with the upcoming winter crisis.

That is the price we are all now paying—literally—for a Government who have spent the 17 months since the referendum fighting among themselves and fighting for position, instead of fighting to get the best deal for Britain—17 months in which, as the OBR report said, we have been given absolutely no detail of the Government’s plan for trade, migration or EU finances; 17 months during which the prospect of no deal has gone from a straw man used to threaten the EU in negotiations to a realistic and increasingly inevitable outcome. And all this is because of the Government’s utter failure to agree on what they want and the Prime Minister’s total inability to show any leadership, whether to her Cabinet or her Back Benches. That is why we are in this mess, why our growth figures are in the global toilet, and why we are wasting £3.7 billion preparing for failure and short-changing the NHS, threatening to cut the Army and raiding the budget for the poorest in the world to pay for it.

The Government are not turning us into a global Britain; they are turning us into a global laughing stock—a global example of bad government, hopeless leadership and a useless Budget. For all their talk of a global Britain, the Government are driving the country at breakneck speed off a cliff, at the bottom of which lies ever greater isolation and ever deeper economic misery. The Budget was one of the Government’s final chances to apply the brakes, but instead they are spending £3.7 billion simply greasing the wheels. It might have saved the Chancellor his job, but it was a shameful dereliction of his duty.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. It will be obvious to the House that this is a very popular debate, with well over 50 colleagues having indicated to me that they wish to speak, so we have to have—

[Interuption.]

Emily Thornberry: First, I wish to take a brief moment to correct the record: the economy is growing, unemployment is falling, our friends are investing, and the country is doing well. Opposition Members will be astonished to hear that, however, because all we see from them is darkness, while all we on the Government Benches can see is light. Still, ’twas ever thus.

While we are on the subject of light, perhaps I could point to a few things the Budget has done well. First, it has recognised investment in foreign affairs. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary highlighted that clearly when he spoke about the budgets for the intelligence services, defence, DFID and the Foreign Office as being in many ways linked—which, of course, they are. It is not possible to think about the defence of the United Kingdom, its protection, its influence, or its help to others without wrapping them all together, and that is why I am pleased the Government are bringing them together so much more strongly than ever before. The fact that my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) and my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart) sit as Ministers in both the Foreign Office and DFID shows very clearly the link between the two.

I would be grateful to hear a little more from the Foreign Secretary about a few areas. On the European lay-down, it is important to maintain our friendship with the EU. He was clear that although we will be looking for opportunities elsewhere, we on the Government Benches believe in opportunities everywhere; one of those places, of course, is among the 27 members of the EU. I am keen, therefore, to hear a little more from the Government about how we see the lay-down of embassies and partnerships under the common foreign and security policy, the common security and defence policy, the Political
and Security Committee, and perhaps even in terms of permanent structured co-operation. Will he talk to us a bit about that?

It is through these established orders that Britain has made herself strong. It is not by accident that we have become a trusted partner and a feared adversary over these past few hundred years; as the Foreign Secretary again said—I find myself in unusual times when I agree with most of the things he says—it is because of the international rules-based system: a system that we helped to write. It is important that we remember our role not just in its formation, but in its maintenance, which is why I urge him to talk a bit more about those areas.

When we talk about maintenance, we mean not only our diplomatic network but areas such as GCHQ. Just as the Navy guarded our sea routes and communications throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, hanged pirates and kept the Malacca straits open, so GCHQ deals with pirates today—okay, it is slightly different: a little less of the hanging; a little more of the hacking.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that while the Government have shown generosity towards the other European nations in assuring them that we will continue in that role, they have not shown the same generosity in the trade negotiations?

Tom Tugendhat: My hon. Friend—I do consider him a friend—will know extremely well that I think the UK’s generous position towards the defence of Europe is not only important, but a matter of our own self-interest. Our frontier should start not at Dover, but at the furthest extents of our allies and ships. In ensuring that we have a continuous at-sea nuclear deterrent and that our submarines and ships are under way across the globe, we ensure that we push our borders out from our own shores and that our people are safer.

Dr Julian Lewis: My hon. Friend mentions the continuous at-sea deterrent. Given the necessary upfront investment in new submarines, what does he make of the idea put about on the Government Benches that perhaps this major investment should be met from the Treasury reserve?

Tom Tugendhat: My right hon. Friend knows extremely well that before 2010 that was exactly where it was met from, because it is an ongoing operation. I urge the Treasury to look very hard at doing so again to ensure that the flux in funding that comes with an expensive programme such as the nuclear deterrent is maintained by the whole of Government. It is, after all, a strategic programme, not a military programme in the standard sense.

There is so much more that we can do. It is not just about the lay-down of defence, although we have spoken about that; it is about the lay-down of our diplomats and aid workers. I am keen that over this coming period we look very hard at this and focus on our strategic priority. Too often we hear about “priorities”—in the plural—and this leads to a deception that one can have more than one; all that tells us, of course, is that we have none. The priority for our country must fundamentally be on the rule of law, on the maintenance of the international rules-based system, and on helping our friends to develop those rules that make us all prosper.

Let me give just two examples that have made a huge difference. The first is the transformation in China of the adherence to intellectual property. Over the last 20 years, that change has enabled Chinese businesses to grow prosperous on the back of their own intellectual strengths, which is brilliant not only for them, but for the whole world, because it prevents piracy and encourages wealth development.

On a more prosaic note, land rights in various African countries have started to be guaranteed. That is a huge advance, because it enables small farmers—smallholders—to own capital, to trade, to develop and to invest. Again, we have an opportunity to promote the international rules-based system, the rule of law, and, indeed, British values.

6.20 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Let me begin by associating myself with those who have sent messages of congratulations to Prince Harry and to Meghan. I also offer warm congratulations to all the young couples who have today declared their undying love for one another, particularly those for whom marriage would have been unlawful just a few short years ago.

Let me also—along with, I am sure, all other Members—associate myself with what the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) said about the appalling tragedy that took place in Egypt a few days ago. It was, I think, a reminder that although the first priority of our defence and security policies must be to defend and protect us, we also have an obligation to protect anyone who needs to be protected.

We should never believe that because the threat of terrorism begins to retreat from our shores, we have no responsibility to continue to support those in Egypt and elsewhere who need to be helped to rid themselves of the scourge of terrorism within their own boundaries.

When I came into the Chamber, I had a feeling—it has been confirmed by what I have heard so far—that the Government’s definition of “global Britain” and where Britain’s place in the world should be is very different from where I want my country to be, and from the role that I want it to play in the world. People may regard my country as Scotland, as I do, or they may insist that it is the United Kingdom. Regardless of that, I simply do not recognise the Government’s direction of travel as being towards the place that my constituents, and indeed my compatriots, want the United Kingdom to head for. Perhaps this is the simplest way of describing the problem: in a headline debate on Britain’s place in the world, neither the opening speech nor the winding-up speech is being made by an International Development Minister. What does that tell us about where international development really lies in the Government’s priorities?

When I think about where Scotland’s place in the world should be, I think of organisations such as Mary’s Meals, which was set up 25 years ago in a tiny village in Argyllshire. I suspect that most people could not even pronounce the name of that village, let alone find it on the map, but it is called Tainult. Mary’s Meals now provides free school meals for more than a million people in the world’s poorest countries, and recently, just before celebrating its 25th anniversary, it reached the extraordinary milestone of providing its billionth meal. Those 1 billion meals have not only provided nourishment, but helped to support the education system in Malawi and elsewhere.
I think of the efforts of two of my constituents a few years ago in response to the refugee crisis in the Mediterranean. Lauren Daly and Lewis Cunningham issued an appeal for any donations that might help the refugees. Two days later, they issued an appeal for a lorry, because they had already collected enough to send to the refugee camps. A few days after that, they issued an appeal for a warehouse to hold the tons and tons of stuff that had been donated.

I think of the actions of people in my former parish of St Columba’s in Cupar and in St Matthew’s in Auchtermuchty, in the constituency of my good and hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins). Over a number of years, they have provided a huge amount of infrastructure for a school in an impoverished part of Uganda, including science teaching laboratories, accommodation blocks, a water supply and school kitchens. All those things have helped the school to become one of the best performing schools in the area. I have no idea what percentage of GDP or what percentage of the income of those volunteers was contributed. Much more important than thinking about percentages is thinking about the impact that their actions are having.

With all three of those examples, I am immensely proud of people’s efforts to help others in the world’s poorest countries. They did that not because it looked good on a CV and not because it would earn them brownie points in the House of Commons or elsewhere, but because it was the right thing to do. When I think of where Scotland wants to be in the world, I think of Mary’s Meals, of Lauren and Lewis, and of St Columba’s and St Matthew’s. I am sorry, but when I think of where the Government appear to want to take Britain in the global world, I think of the ethnic cleansing of the Chagos Islands, and of £2 billion of arms sales to a country that is accused of more than 150 counts of crimes against humanity in Yemen. I have to ask whether those two directions of travel are at all reconcilable; as we say in Fife, I hae ma doots about that one.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): I am genuinely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Scotland is part of the United Kingdom, so it has access to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, its embassies—there are hundreds across the world—and the Department for International Trade, which ensures that Scottish fish products are sold in China and Vietnam, and that Scottish whisky is on its way to markets in India. Is that not a great direction of travel for Scotland in the United Kingdom?

Peter Grant: I suspect that I have much more confidence in the world-class quality of the food and drink that is produced in Scotland than the hon. Gentleman. I do not believe that Scotch whisky really depends on the Foreign Secretary to become a world leader, and I do not believe that the world-class food and drink that we produce in Scotland really depends on gunboat diplomacy to make people throughout the world understand. What it does depend on is barrier-free access to markets, and it is a bit rich for those who support the removal of our barrier-free access to the biggest single market on the planet to claim to have a monopoly of wisdom about how to develop our international trade.

Let me say once again that I do not accept the argument that the sole purpose of foreign policy is to benefit wealthy investors and bankers in these islands. The most important part of the foreign policy of any developed and wealthy nation is to ensure that its wealth is distributed so that terrorist attacks such as the ones that we have seen in Egypt recently, and the starvation that takes the lives of thousands of children every day, become things of the past. If I have to pay a wee bit more income tax, or any other tax, to make that happen, I for one am more than happy to dip into my pocket.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): The hon. Gentleman referred to the intervention in Yemen in a castigating way. Will he at least acknowledge that many Arab countries are involved in the war in Yemen, and that they are trying to avert a humanitarian crisis and deal with the difficulties in that country that are a direct result of Iranian intervention in support of the Houthi rebels? The situation is much more complicated than the hon. Gentleman is trying to suggest.

Peter Grant: I entirely agree that it is more complicated than it is often presented as being. I have not said that Iran is entirely innocent, but Iran is not buying £2 billion-worth of weapons of war from the United Kingdom, and Saudi Arabia is. Saudi Arabia stands accused of war crimes. Until those allegations are investigated, I do not think that we should be selling weapons to those who may be committing crimes of mass murder, and I do not consider the question of whether or not they are using our weapons to commit those crimes to be relevant.

When I looked at the timetable for our Budget debate, I saw “Monday: global Britain”, and thought, “That’s not going to take very long, is it?” The fact is that even the Government’s own misguided ambitions for Britain’s place in the world, which I believe are still based on the fanciful belief that we are somehow entitled to retain an empire and colonies, rather than a simple acknowledgement that the world has moved on since the days when any nation could claim the right to colonise any other nation—

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Peter Grant: No, I will not give way just now.

When we look at Conservative Members’ responses to statements by the sovereign Government of Ireland over the last couple of days, we have to wonder whether they recognise that that country’s Ministers have not only the right but an absolute responsibility to speak in the interests of their citizens. If what they say happens not to coincide with the interests of citizens in the rest of the British Isles, that might be something for negotiation.

Even despite the Government’s misguided ambitions for the role that they think Britain is entitled to play, that role is being catastrophically undermined by the shambles—“shambles” is as strong a word as I can use in the Chamber—of Brexit. Nor is it helped by the fact that we have a Foreign Secretary of whom people in the west of Scotland might say, “You cannot take him anywhere,” to which the response would be, “Or you have to take him twice—the second time to apologise.” When the Foreign Secretary assured us that he had had a number of meetings on the Myanmar crisis, I could not help wondering how many were required for him to apologise for the crassly insensitive and offensive way in which he referred to the people of Myanmar in one of his official pronouncements. We can joke about the
[Peter Grant]

buffoonery of the right hon. Gentleman, who is no longer in the Chamber. Everybody can say things that are stupid and wish that they had not, but if they start to make too much of a habit of it, especially if they hold as important and sensitive a position as Foreign Secretary, the time comes when the Prime Minister has to start asking whether she has the right person in the job.

We have heard a lot from Conservative Members during our Brexit debates about how leaving the European Union will open up all these wonderful markets for the United Kingdom. It might open up the American market, if we comply with the requirement announced two weeks ago by the American Secretary of Commerce to drop our opposition to genetically modified foods and chlorinated chicken. That is too high a price to pay, so I hope that the Treasury Minister who sums up today’s debate will confirm that if that is the requirement, there will be no deal with the United States of America.

I remind the House of a report published in the last Parliament by the Select Committee on Exiting the European Union on the Government’s negotiating priorities, particularly in the context of global Britain. Paragraph 170 says:

“The Government should seek a UK-EU Free Trade Agreement...which covers both goods and services and retains the mutual recognition of standards and conformity assessments.”

It finishes:

“The Government should maintain the maximum possible flexibility in its negotiating approach to achieve these outcomes.”

I am not quite sure how unilaterally deciding that the customs union and single market are off the table counts as flexible or anything like it.

Paragraph 198 says:

“The Government must provide more clarity as to the features of its preferred customs arrangement with the EU and how it will differ from a customs union.”

That report was published months and months ago—certainly before the election—but we still do not have that clarity from the Government. We hear the same platitudes, the same soundbites and the same slogans, but we still have absolutely no firm and concrete proposals, even for how they are going to reconcile the border that runs across the island of Ireland, never mind how they are going to reconcile the irreconcilable standards it may well fall under the UN definition of genocide, which includes the forcible or fraudulent removal of a population. What account has been taken of their wishes? It seems to me that if we steal something from someone, the only way to make an apology seem sincere is to offer to hand it back. Having stolen the islands from their population, no apology can be sincere unless the Government are prepared to offer to hand them back.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Peter Grant: No. Time is short and I do not want any other hon. Members to miss a chance to speak. [Hon. Members: “Give way!”] If the hon. Gentleman has put his name down to speak, he will get the chance; if he has not, it is unfair on those who have done and who may have prepared speeches.

The debate so far confirms that the direction in which the Government intend to take all four of these nations is very different from the direction that the people of Scotland have made it clear that they want to take. The United Kingdom Government’s vision of their place in the world is very different from how the people of Scotland see our place in the world—I suspect it might be very different from how a lot of the ordinary people of England, Wales and Northern Ireland see their place as well. If the Government believe that Scotland has no option but to follow their lead and be dragged into fulfilling a role in the world that is not the one we want, they are making a mistake as monumental and momentous as any in the catalogue of disastrous misjudgements that we have seen by Ministers in this Government over the last two years.

6.36 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): It is very difficult to follow that speech, but on an upbeat note, I welcome this measured, balanced and forward-looking Budget, which, coupled with today’s industrial strategy, looks beyond Brexit with optimism and realism. Alas, the same cannot be said of the Momentum alternative from the Opposition. Only the shadow Chancellor, or perhaps Paul Daniels, could possibly have the chutzpah to claim that spending commitments of £330 billion already racked up, resulting in debt interest payments of £270 billion over the next Parliament—as predicted by the very forecasters whom the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) was so keen to quote earlier—would amount to nothing and pay for itself.

We cannot be complacent, and I certainly welcome the renewed urgency in tackling the productivity deficit and the industrial strategy, which concentrates on smart technologies, clean technologies, fast technology and
preventive technology, because that is key. This year alone, China and India will each produce 1 million engineering graduates, many of them working in manufacturing and service sectors in high-tech industries. In 20 years, many of the growth jobs will be jobs that do not exist today, so education is key. That is why I welcome the investment in research and upskilling that is a hallmark of this Budget and today’s vote of confidence by the pharmaceutical companies in this country’s future in that area.

I welcome the help for business and the end of the staircase tax, which was feared. I welcome the help for small house builders in particular, with the extension of the home building fund to help more house building projects on small sites. I also welcome the commitment to more homes. We need to build more homes, as well as more new towns, so I welcome the stamp duty exemption for first-time young buyers. There are some unintended omissions. People will not qualify if buying a property jointly with somebody who has previously owned one or even somebody who has made a loss on previous properties. There are also question marks over how shared ownership is treated, but the principle is absolutely right.

However, we need to be more imaginative in promoting rent-to-buy schemes and creating incentives for the three quarters of a million empty properties that we still have in this country. There is also the bigger issue of fairness in stamp duty. The average price of a house in my constituency of Worthing is £327,000, while in Wrexham it is just £179,000 and in Wakefield it is £186,000, but the rate of stamp duty is the same. Should it not be based on size rather than price, depending on what part of the country people live in? We need to incentivise downsizing by older people to free up family homes, and they would still have to pay stamp duty under the current regime. We need to think smarter about incentivising imaginative intergenerational developments that encourage and enable families to stay closer to each other, rather than being priced out of the area where they grew up.

As chairman of the all-party parliamentary wine and spirit group, I should like to cite one world-beating industry: the wine and spirit industry. It supports 554,000 jobs in this country and generates £50 billion for the economy.

Ms Ghani: As my hon. Friend might know, the Foreign Office has 274 posts in 168 countries, and they are perfectly placed to export or promote English sparkling wine, specifically from my constituency of Wealden, as outlined in my ten-minute rule Bill, which he supported earlier this year.

Tim Loughton: My hon. Friend anticipates my next point. I am delighted that the Chancellor chose to freeze the duty on wines and spirits, but the duty on a bottle of wine is still £2.16, and the duty on a bottle of sparkling wine is £2.77. In France, the duty on a bottle of wine is 2p. Surely, after Brexit, we can give a boost to the English wine industry, which will be producing 10 million bottles, to allow our quality wines to compete even more on an international level. English sparkling wine beats French champagne hands down in blind tastings throughout the world. Also, why should there be a higher rate of duty on sparkling wine, when it is of a lower alcoholic strength than still wine? Surely that point has been conceded, given the action that is being taken on white cider.

Sir Edward Leigh: Britain is producing excellent white wine, but there is a real problem with increased alcoholism and liver disease. Does my hon. Friend think that the solution would be to introduce unit pricing, to try to freeze young people out of the market for very high-alcohol drinks?

Tim Loughton: No, I think the answer is to encourage people to drink wisely and in a balanced and responsible way, and to drink higher value and higher quality English and British products.

I also welcome the extension of the rail discount card to those aged between 26 and 30. However, there is a flaw in that arrangement because the cards cannot be used at peak times, when many people need to travel to work. A bigger problem is the fact that many 16-year-olds who have to get to school or college or to their jobs often qualify for adult rate fares on buses and trains. I urge the Chancellor to have a look at that as well. I also urge him to look again at the case of the WASPI women, who continue to suffer the biggest injustice as a result of the change in pension ages. Perhaps at the very least he could extend the free bus pass to those women who would have qualified for their pensions at an earlier age.

Finally, one area that does not get much of a mention in the Budget relates to families and early intervention. I know that the Chancellor sympathises with this issue. Family breakdown in this country costs £49 billion a year and it is also one of the sources of the housing shortage, with families living in fragmented circumstances. We need to invest much more to deal with the problems of broken and troubled families, as well as with perinatal mental health and with child neglect, which alone costs this country £15 billion a year. Just as the Chancellor invests in roads, infrastructure and business in order to boost the economy, so we should invest more in our young children, as they represent the most valuable investment of the growth jobs will be jobs that do not exist today, and that it is afraid to intervene when necessary. What does that tell the world about our poverty of ambition?

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Before I bring the next speaker in, it might help those who are higher up the list to know that if they intervene on others, they will go to the bottom of the list, because all they are doing is taking minutes off the others. I am sure that everyone will want to accommodate one other.

6.43 pm

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): Over the past 50 years, the United Kingdom has had a proud history of leading the world in protecting and advancing the cause of humanity. We have vaccinated millions against diseases, given more than 5 million children around the world an education, and fought off fascism on the continent. Our ability to do all that is one of the key reasons that this country has been a beacon for people around the world. There was a time when the Foreign Office exerted a positive influence globally, but I worry that it has now lost its standing on the world stage and that it is afraid to intervene when necessary. What does that tell the world about our poverty of ambition for what the UK can stand for in the future? I worry about what that means for the future generations around the world who will need our Government to step in at times of crisis. I worry about the unnecessary suffering that will go unchallenged, and about the stateless refugees
who have fled state-sponsored violence with no hope of returning home. And yes, at this moment, I worry about those Rohingya refugees in border camps who now fear forced repatriation after fleeing persecution and violence.

I recently visited the border of Myanmar and Bangladesh to treat patients in a clinic and hear the testimonies of the Rohingya people, a million of whom have fled torture and persecution in Myanmar. I returned from there last week. When I was there, I met and treated refugees who recounted their harrowing journey and their experiences back in what they had called home. What was most striking was that 80% of those in the camps were women and children. One man recounted a night when the Myanmar army arrived in his village. He described how the entire village of 3,000 people was razed to the ground. All the menfolk were dismembered and murdered, and the women were dragged by their hair and gang raped. Children who were fleeing were dragged back to the village and thrown alive on to burning fires. For the military, age was no barrier. They threw babies on to the fires. I held those charred babies in my arms last week.

I welcome the efforts our Government have made to provide aid and assistance—I really do—but if our efforts are not to be in vain, we need to take firmer action to prevent further atrocities. The extra aid package announced by the International Development Secretary today is a welcome step, but this far, our action equates to giving a gunshot victim a sticking plaster while allowing the shooter to roam free. The Bangladesh and Myanmar Governments have struck a deal to send the Rohingya back to Myanmar. Our Government must, with international partners, ensure the protection of the Rohingya by preventing forced repatriation, as well as by providing the essentials they need to survive and by guaranteeing their safety if they do go back.

My biggest worry so far is that no external organisations have been allowed access to Rakhine state. The UK must use all its leverage power to get access, and send a ministerial delegation to the region to investigate. As permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, we have the power to act. Our failure to act in the face of genocide goes against everything it means to be British: we must be courageous, compassionate and generous. We have to ask ourselves: will we be on the right side of history? The suffering of the Rohingya people is another opportunity for us to prove that the human capacity for good will always trump that for evil.

Of course, the Government are able to spend money only because of the hard work and effort of the British people. There is no such thing as Government money: it is taxpayers’ money, and public debt is merely deferred taxation. We must be careful never to forget that. We are slowly but surely putting the age of austerity behind us, and I hope that in the next few years we will see further increases in spending on health, education, social care, the police and our armed forces. Those are the things that the British public say they want us to spend money on. They are not stupid, however, and they know that when times are tough, the Government need to tighten their belt in the same way as they do in their own households.

It is telling, however, that the British public’s attitude is changing. They are confident that this Conservative Government spend their hard-earned money wisely, and opinion polls are showing that there is a greater willingness to accept increased taxation. We might need to consider that at some point. However, they would be willing to pay more tax only if they had absolute confidence that the money would be spent carefully, and that is something that the Conservative party—and only the Conservative party—can deliver. We are rightly and instinctively the party of low taxation. We will dive into people’s wallets only if there is an absolute necessity to do so. We would prefer, instead, to chase after tax dodgers and close loopholes so that normal hard-working families do not have to pay more tax.

We are also spreading the tax burden fairly. The tax gap is at an all-time low, corporation tax is increasing, and the top 1% of income tax payers pay 28% of all income tax. At 45%, the top rate of income tax is higher now than it was for 99.7% of the last Labour Government, during which it was 40% for 13 years. In 2010, the tax-free allowance was a measly £6,475; it is now £11,500, and I am pleased that it will go up to £11,850 next year. That has enabled us, the Conservatives, to take 4 million of the lowest paid out of income tax altogether, with the average taxpayer saving £1,000 on their tax bill every year. That is important for the lowest paid in society. Furthermore, the Conservatives have increased the minimum wage. It was £5.93 in 2010, but the living wage is £7.50 today, and both the living wage and the minimum wage get inflation-busting increases in this Budget. While the Opposition may talk about helping the least well-off in society, it is the Conservatives who act, and long may that continue.

6.47 pm

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): There is much to praise in this Budget. It contains something like 300 measures, many of which focus clearly on the future and on the nation’s potential and creativity, including those on artificial intelligence, driverless cars and fibre broadband, and on enhancing our science, technology, engineering and maths—STEM—skills base. We are already one of the world’s most advanced digital nations, and many of the measures in the Budget will enable us to secure that digital leadership for many years to come. I also warmly welcome the increase in spending for the NHS, for housing and for infrastructure, as well as the additional changes to and money for universal credit.

6.50 pm

Mr Ronnie Campbell (Blyth Valley) (Lab): As a Labour MP who wants to leave Europe, I am a rare animal. I am a non-believer in the undemocratic way that the European Union has been run for many years, but I do get a bit worried when I think about how we are going to pay £40 billion to leave the place. It beggars belief, and I wonder what is going to come next. Are we going to agree to the rules for another two years? Things keep on coming along.

I want to talk about my constituency and what is happening there, especially to the police. We have had seven years of austerity, and I do not believe that it has come to an end, as the hon. Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) said. We are not getting any further forward with austerity; we are in the same place as we were before the Budget was presented.
Northumbria police have had the biggest slice taken out of their budget of any police force. It has been reduced by 37%, or £124 million, and any authority that takes that sort of cut—be it the police or whatever—will lose. Its reserves have been reduced from £71 million to £11.9 million. I hear a lot about authorities having to use their reserves, local government in particular, but they cannot use them all the time. Reserves have to be kept for a reason. The number of police officers in Northumberland has fallen by 900, from 4,187 to 3,283—a reduction of 22%.

The number of police community support officers has been reduced by 244 over the same period. The number of police staff has been reduced by 279, and police stations have closed. It is worrying. We are taking the biggest police cut in the country, and we are getting concerned. I am sure that all the other Members for the area would agree with me, and I hope that they will get up and mention it. We cannot take any more cuts, but I understand that another £51 million of cuts is to come by 2020, when I should imagine we will have no police at all.

On housing, the situation is interesting in Northumberland. We had a core strategy that was put through by the previous Labour council before the elections in May this year. The plan took six years, and we got it in place, but then the Conservatives got in power and scrapped it. It is now a free-for-all in Northumberland, and people can build anywhere they want. When the Conservatives said that they were going to build so many houses in Northumberland, we asked the question and, lo and behold, they are only going to build them on the green-belt areas in my constituency and in that of my hon. Friend the Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery). As for Berwick, Alnwick, Hexham or Ponteland, they are not going to build on the green belt there—oh no—just on the green belt in our constituencies. They will have to start building more schools if they want that many houses built in my area, because we do not have any room in our schools, so I do not know what they are going to do for the pupils in my area.

6.55 pm

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): Coming at a time when we are exiting the EU, this is a prudent Budget. Obviously, we would have liked to see more of our own special things in it, but that is the nature of a Budget. The problem for the Opposition is that, despite stresses in some areas, the British economy is performing pretty well on the whole, which is why the polls show that, even at this stage, the Conservative party is either level-pegging or ahead of the Opposition, which is a real problem for them.

Leaving the EU presents the United Kingdom with an opportunity to think about itself, to redefine itself and to decide where it wishes to go. It was US Secretary of State Dean Acheson who, in the aftermath of the second world war, famously said: “Great Britain has lost an empire and not yet found a role.”

That was true. When we think about our withdrawal east of Suez and about throwing our lot in with the EU, an individual British role was in a sense subsumed by those events, but it is now incumbent on us to talk Britain up and our constituents want us to do that. It may be a difficult challenge for some and, judging by some of the contributions from the Opposition tonight, that is not their inclination, but people want us to talk Britain up and to think about how we can reinvigorate our advantages. With one of the best militaries in the world, we have hard power. We are committed to NATO, and we encouraged the Americans to spend the amount of money that we are spending. We are a permanent member of the UN Security Council. Those things give us real global influence, and we should be proud of them and guard them jealously.

Increasingly, our soft power cannot be divorced from hard power; we need to use them both at the same time. We have our values, our parliamentary system, the work of institutions such as the British Council, our culture and our royal family. I say that at a time when the world is yet again focused on us due to the engagement of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle.

Ms Ghani: My right hon. Friend mentioned the British Council, which recently noted that one in seven world leaders studied at a British university. That presents a great opportunity for us not only to promote our universities, but to export our values overseas.

Sir Hugo Swire: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I will come to that in a minute. When I used to travel around the world on behalf of the Foreign Office, it was fantastic to have the GREAT Britain campaign branding everything that the UK was doing.

On the subject of the Foreign Office, I note that the budget will be £2 billion in 2017-18 and then £1.2 billion in the subsequent two years. I have some nervousness here. I understand the arguments about official development assistance, but let us compare that with the Department for International Development’s budget in those years: it goes from £7.6 billion to £8.2 billion—I cannot quite understand how the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), who speaks for the Opposition, managed to regard that as a cut. I believe that the Foreign Office should own what the UK does abroad. There are too many departments in capitals around the world that do not dovetail with what the FCO is doing. I will leave it until another time to make the point again that the more closely integrated DFID is with the FCO, so much the better.

The Foreign Office needs to expand. We are obviously withdrawing from the European External Action Service—the Federico Mogherini-led overseas diplomatic corps of Europe—so we need to think about where we are going to re-resource our posts around the world. I believe in an international, rules-based system, and I believe in Britain’s role in it. I would also like the UK Government to lead on a new financial architecture. The Bretton Woods system is outdated and fails to recognise the emergence of countries such as China.

I want a properly resourced military that retains our amphibious capabilities and our peacekeeping role. I want the UK to engage better with the Commonwealth, and what better opportunity is there to restate our commitment to it than the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in London next April? I want the UK to recognise and recommit to our responsibilities to our overseas territories. I ask the Foreign Secretary whether we can press the OECD harder to look at the redefinition of aid and to consider why we cannot provide more aid to the overseas territories. Some of the calculations on middle-income countries are fallacious. Financial services are counted in those calculations,
but the money does not go to individuals in those countries—the money often flows in and out. We should be able to fund our overseas territories properly.

I would like us to engage with the neglected markets of Latin America. I would like British companies to take advantage of China’s one-belt system. My hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) referred to scholarships, and we should boost the Chevening, Marshall and Commonwealth scholarship programmes, possibly bringing them together as one scholarship programme. We can continue to lead on climate change and on protecting vulnerable states—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I call Alex Cunningham.

7 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): The future of global Britain will start with Britain facing greater isolation in the world. We are taking a begging bowl around the world and pleading for trade deals to give our nation a future beyond Brexit, and it is not going well. Sadly, the Chancellor’s Budget has nothing to ease the way. Yes, he has set aside £3 billion to help us over the shock, but I remind him that it cost £1 billion just to buy off the Democratic Unionist party to prop up a weak Government. No one should be in any doubt that, although countries may want special trade deals with Britain, they will exact a challenging price. Two examples: the USA wants us to drop our food safety standards, and India suggests that the UK must be prepared to allow more immigration if it is to agree a deal.

The Government must change course. They must end the public sector pay cap, introduce further controls on high interest, bring forward investment in infrastructure, reverse the planned tax giveaways for the super-rich and reject a deregulated, no-deal, race to the bottom Brexit.

Living on industrial Teesside, I am well aware of the international status of many of our companies, from CF Fertilisers, Lotte and Chemoxy to Quorn, Fujitsu and Greenery—they are all striving to be internationally competitive while sustaining investment and jobs. They have done a grand job until now, but the uncertainty surrounding them has resulted in very real concern that frustrates local managers as they compete with their international owners’ other plants abroad for investment in the UK.

Those companies are anxious about Brexit, and they are looking for even greater Government assurance that they will not simply be left to wither but will have a business environment in which to thrive. They want to see the retention of the regulations on the registration, evaluation and authorisation of chemicals for British companies post-Brexite, as exercising common standards with the EU will ease their ability to trade on the continent. I see nothing of that in the industrial strategy.

A few weeks ago, the Government woke from their deep slumber on carbon capture and storage with much trumpeting of the £100 million to be invested in demonstrator projects. That is a positive step, but it is only a tiny step when we need huge leaps to make Britain a world leader.

Teesside got a specific mention in the Budget speech, in which the Chancellor appeared to announce a major investment in the former SSI site in Redcar. He announced £123 million of funding, but the reality is that the Government are giving themselves the cash to fulfil a funding commitment that had already been made to keep the site safe. That means we will get just £5 million.

I share the deep disappointment that there is nothing to improve public sector pay. Replacing Conservative Members’ heartfelt and passionate speeches in support of our police, our health staff, our council workers and our prison officers with hard cash to give them a pay rise would go some way to helping those people to meet increased inflation.

The Government cannot starve a system of funds, watch it start to crumble and then half-heartedly try to inject some money and claim they are rescuing it. The NHS asked for an extra £4 billion a year, and instead it got a promise of £350 million for this winter and £10 billion over the course of the Parliament for capital projects.

This is my seventh speech after a Budget, and it is the seventh time that I remind the House that in 2010—seven years ago; three sevens, maybe my luck will be in—the hospital for Stockton was cancelled. Ever since we have faced the looming threat of the closure of the accident and emergency department either at North Tees or Darlington, which will force people to travel further for emergency treatment. I represent an area where unemployment remains more than double the national average, where health inequalities are part of everyday life and where our businesses seek real assurances from the Government that there is a future out there. I still feel pessimistic after this Budget.

7.4 pm

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): There is much to welcome in the Budget, not least when we talk about Britain on the global stage. Infrastructure investment in this country will be important in raising our productivity and making us fit for the global stage. With that in mind, the £300 million to link other infrastructure improvements to the HS2 project is important to me, not least because it will link the HS2 station at Leeds to the main line, an idea raised by Transport for the North. That means there is now no need for a mile-long viaduct over Swillington in my constituency. It is not just about saving money on the project; the money should be reinvested in local trams and trains to ease congestion in the city of Leeds. We cannot be truly globally competitive if we are not working efficiently. It sucks away the productivity of this country if people lose a lot of time getting to work.

I was frankly appalled to hear the comments of the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant), the foreign affairs spokesman for the Scottish National party. He said that Britain has no role to play in the world, which is simply not true.

Peter Grant: I do not remember saying that Britain does not have a role to play in the world. What I said, and I will say it again, is that the role in the world the UK Government appear to have decided for Britain is not a role that the people of Scotland will be comfortable following. Nobody would deny that any country in the
world has a role to play. If the Official Report shows that I said anything different, I will withdraw it.

[Interruption.]"}

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. The Front Benchers have had a good go tonight. If they are going to intervene, it has to be with very short interventions. I am very sorry but, if people give way, others might fall off the list.

Alec Shelbrooke: My Conservative colleagues simply do not recognise what the hon. Member for Glenrothes has just said as a fact in Scotland. There is only one party on the rise in Scotland, and it is not the SNP.

The reality is that our country and this Government can stand proud of our work on the world stage. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan). The whole House recognises that she is a credit to the medical profession, and it is a credit to this House that she took time to go out to see the Rohingya crisis at first hand—it is a terrible situation. I recognise what she said about babies, as I heard the reports on “From Our Own Correspondent”. I cannot imagine the pain she must have been through. I pay tribute to her, because she is a credit to this House and to her profession.

That represents what this country is good at, which is helping in the world. I am proud that more money has been spent by Britain alone than by all the other European countries added together to help the Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. We have been taking refugees, too—not to the extent that other nations have, fair enough, but we have been doing our bit. More importantly, we are putting resources on the ground. I simply do not recognise the view that this Government, however people want to describe them, are setting this country out as a place with which nobody wants to be associated, because that is not true.

It was the Royal Navy that was in the hurricane-torn areas of the Caribbean. Going back a few years, it was the Royal Navy that sorted out the Ebola crisis in Sierra Leone. This Government have committed to raising the defence budget by 0.5 percentage points over inflation year on year, because we recognise the need to invest in our armed forces.

Yes, only a few nations spend 2% or more of GDP on defence, but we are one of even fewer nations to spend more than 20% of our defence budget on capital infrastructure within our armed forces. That shows the renewal of our Royal Navy under this Government and our investment in other areas of defence. There is much on the global economy and global Britain of which we can be proud.

We have heard many people, and we will hear more this evening, talk about Brexit and where Brexit is, but Labour Members cannot carry on talking about Brexit without coming to one fundamental decision: we cannot nationalise if we are in the single market, so for Labour Members to say that they feel the Government should maintain our membership of the single market is totally at odds with the manifesto they stood on. I do not think we should be nationalising, which is looking backwards, but the reality is that we simply cannot nationalise under state aid rules if we are in the single market. I therefore seek some clarity tonight. Is it the Labour party’s position that it definitely wants to leave the single market?

7.9 pm

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Unlike my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham), this is my first Budget speech in seven years, so I shall enjoy myself in making it. In his great roman à thèse on the situation of Britain, “Sybil”, written in 1845, Disraeli referred to the two nations: the nation that was growing in prosperity—the bourgeoisie, the landowners and professional classes; and the wage slaves in the factories and those who eked a bare existence on the land. Unfortunately, if Disraeli were to come back today, he may see the similarities, rather than the differences. We are quite simply talking about two nations here.

In my short Budget speech, I wish to draw attention to a number of issues that highlight those two nations, the first of which is housing. Although the £44 billion is a welcome figure, we need to boost local authority housing—what we used to call “council housing”. The only reference to this in the Red Book, on page 63, states:

“The Budget will lift Housing Revenue Account borrowing caps for councils in areas of high affordability pressure, so they can build more council homes.”

That takes effect only in 2019-20, so we already have to wait a year, and we are talking about £1 billion. My simplistic calculation leads me to believe that that may allow us to build a few hundred homes, but we have a crisis in social renting and it needs crisis finance. We are not providing that.

Other areas are simply ignored in the Budget—for example, the care sector. Much of my local care sector is in crisis; there is not the money to provide any decent quality of care. Renewables are flattining. If we are to go towards the carbon-free economy, we have to boost renewables, yet aside from a brief mention there is nothing about them in this Budget. Likewise, we are not trying to do anything other than offer placebos on education. Sadly, the national funding formula, which many of us who have supported the f40 campaign have long awaited, has not improved the funding of many of our schools. Indeed, things are worse for many of our schools because of the way in which the Government have, by a clever trick, now conflated the special educational needs budget into the base budget. That is a tragedy because it is our children who will be suffering.

I welcome the comments in the Budget on what we intend to do about plastics, but we need to go much further in tackling waste. We need to boost the way in which we deal with food recycling, recognising that there is an alternative to incineration, which seems to be how the Government Front Benchers see us dealing with waste. In a time of air quality problems, that is exactly the wrong direction to go in. I welcome what the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) said about the WASPI women. I had a short meeting with them on Saturday and it was one of the most moving meetings I have ever sat in, just because they feel that they have been robbed. To me, all those issues are clear dividing lines. We live in a country where we do not want those dividing lines. We need to bring it back together and I hope that a future Government will—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I call Sir Robert Syms.
7.13 pm

Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): I sat in this House for 13 years when the Labour party was in government and listened to many speeches by the right hon. Gordon Brown, including a number in which he said he would abolish boom and bust. That was before we had the most almighty bust in 2007-08—

Alex Cunningham: Thanks to the banks.

Sir Robert Syms: Well, you were the people who regulated the banks and you were the people in charge for 13 years. Before we hit the crisis, you had a 3% deficit and you were too reliant on bankers’ bonuses and the City to provide money. The problem with that was that the deficit spiralled up to £160 billion. The then Labour Chief Secretary to the Treasury left a note saying that there was no money—and there was no money. When I look at the Red Book today, I see that the deficit for the foreseeable future is less than £50 billion. That means we have reduced it by well over £100 billion, which is a remarkable achievement. While doing that we have upped the income tax allowances from £6,000 to £11,500; increased the minimum wage and the living wage; kept up our commitments to the third world with the 0.7% foreign aid commitment; kept the economy growing; taken 4 million people out of tax; and created more than 3 million jobs. What’s not to like about this Government’s progress over the past seven or eight years?

In 2009, Eddie George, the then Governor of the Bank of England, said that whoever takes over this country’s economy will be ruined for a generation, yet my party has won two general elections—I admit that the 2017 one was on penalties. The reality is that this Government have been elected in 2010, 2015 and 2017, and I think that if there was a general election today, we would win, because we are more realistic and optimistic about the nation’s prospects. The country has made a decision. History will tell whether it is the right or the wrong one, but the country wants optimistic politicians who are going to go out and make a success of the decision the people have made. There is a big wide world out there. We need to have a decent relationship with our European partners, and I hope and believe we will have a decent negotiation. But it is right and proper that the Government make preparations so that if things do not work out properly, we can continue to manage our affairs.

The OBR has come up with some forecasts that are not as optimistic as they were, but throughout the time the OBR has done this, its forecasts have gone up and down and have never been right. That is because they are forecasts, and events come in. My view of life in the world over the next four or five years is a rather more optimistic one. We have relatively full employment, business is going to have to invest if it is to increase productivity, and I believe it will, and I think we are going to do well as the years go by. Clearly, there are uncertainties, and changing our relationships will cause short-term problems, but over five, 10 or 15 years, I think Britain is going to be a great success story. And I believe the United Kingdom is going to be a great success story, because the Union that is the great success for our nation is that of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. I am therefore optimistic because the Government produced a good and balanced Budget, which has given a little bit of a tax cut and a little bit of increased spending, but which, broadly speaking, sticks to the financial plan. At the end of the day, sound finance is the only way of being a caring Government.

7.17 pm

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): This is a debate on Britain in the world but, as hon. Members know, all politics is local, so I wish to focus on what is happening in my constituency and how issues in the world are affecting it. This Budget has shown me, once again, that austerity is not working, that the pain of austerity is hitting the poorest people in my community hardest, that major businesses have real uncertainty about the future because of the current EU situation, and that key industries in my area need real answers from the Government about the future of their economy in the next few weeks and months ahead.

My area in Wales has faced a 7% cut in its budget from the Welsh Assembly over the past seven years—this is real money being lost. That has had an impact on our ability to build council houses, although my local Flintshire County Council is trying to defray that by building them now, and on public services. The public sector pay cap is squeezing hard the incomes of people who are contributing to our society and working hard in their communities. We have uncertainty about the European Union, and the Foreign Secretary’s opening remarks provided no clarity on the key issues that my constituents face. We also have that squeeze on local government spending, which is difficult.

In my area, we make things. We make planes and cars, we produce steel, we do construction and housing, and we have farming and tourism. Yet all those industries, even today, face uncertainty because of the inconsequential approach of the Government to the European Union issue. Let me take Airbus as just one example. It employs 6,000 people in my constituency. It is asking for a transitional deal for two years and wants to remain in the single market. Its chief operating officer, Tom Williams, has said that the world is now a dangerous place for this successful company with high-skilled workers that produces world-class planes. Airbus exports £6 billion-worth of goods to the European Union each year as part of the manufacturing industry. Its employees make 80,000 trips each year to make those planes in France, Spain and elsewhere. This is a really important issue.

EU funds worth £680 million come into Wales each year, but I heard nothing from the Foreign Secretary about what will replace those funds. The farming industry in my area exports £250 million-worth of sheep and beef products to Europe, but we have heard nothing today about tariffs or what will happen in respect of contracts that may well be signed as early as February and March next year. We will potentially have to compete with Australia and New Zealand in the sheep and beef markets.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The right hon. Gentleman makes an incredibly important point about sheep farming and exports. Does he acknowledge that 40% of British sheep products are exported, with 90% of that going into the single market? We face a 52% tariff on those products under World Trade Organisation rules.

David Hanson: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. His is a sheep-producing area. Alongside tourism, and the production of planes, cars and steel, my area
produces sheep and beef products that are exported. It is critical that we have answers on these issues. If we are to leave the EU, which my constituents voted to do, we need to understand at least what the tariffs will be, and what future production values will be. In his response to this debate, and elsewhere, the Minister should provide some clarity on these matters so that my constituents know exactly what we face.

We face a squeeze on local government expenditure. On behalf of Labour councillors on Flintshire County Council, my hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami) and I sent a petition to the Treasury last week. We face a real squeeze at a time when we are seeing increased charges for services and cuts to real expenditure. The county council has been doing a good job in trying to manage the economy as well as it can.

With all that uncertainty, we need not only clarity from the Government, but something referred to in paragraph 4.88 of the Budget document, which says:

“The government will begin formal negotiations towards a North Wales growth deal.”

With due respect, the Chancellor promised that a year ago, and he promised it again in March this year. When he came to Mold in my constituency during the general election campaign to try to unseat me, he promised it then. He is now promising “negotiations” in this Budget, so all I ask of the Minister is that he tells us how much money is behind that plan and how long the negotiations will take. Can we ensure that, when they are finished, we will have improved infrastructure, improved transport links and improved investment in our economy to create jobs, given that jobs may well be put under pressure because of what is happening now with the European Union?

7.22 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I wish to follow on from what my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Sir Robert Syms) said. This has been a good week for the Government because we are focusing on the most important thing—the Budget and the economy—rather than on ourselves.

When people start to think about what is going on in the economy, they start to wonder whether the Labour party yet has the answers. If I was a Labour MP, I would be worried that the opinion polls show us level-pegging. Why? Because the No. 1 problem that faces our economy—it is infinitely greater than so many other problems, particularly Brexit—is the size of the national debt. The question the Labour party has to answer is whether adding to that debt would solve our problems.

I sat through the speech by the shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), so I heard him say that he wants to invest for the future. That sounds plausible, but the trouble is that it does not matter what the money is spent on—schools, hospitals, capital or revenue—because if that increases the national debt, our interest repayments increase. The problem we face as a nation is that our interest repayments on the national debt are already more than what we spend on defence, about which we have been talking, and the police every year.

The national debt is far too large. The shadow Chancellor tells me, “You’ve added to the national debt.” That is entirely true—the national debt is still rising by £186 million a day. I am allowed to speak for four minutes, during which the national debt will rise by £200,000. But would we solve our problems by adopting the Labour party’s strategy, which would add to that national debt? We are already facing so many problems in repaying it. I said that the national debt will increase by £200,000 in the four minutes of this speech, but it was increasing by £300,000 a minute when the coalition Government took power in 2010.

Alec Shelbrooke: A minute?

Sir Edward Leigh: Yes, it was increasing by £300,000 a minute.

The central point for the Opposition is that they have to be credible, as new Labour found out in the years before it took power in 1997. The central credibility argument is whether, when the national debt is so crippling—as I said earlier, our repayments are equivalent to paying for 10 Queen Elizabeth-class aircraft carriers every year—we can solve our problems by adding to it. My contention is that that is absolutely not the case.

Well into this Parliament, the reason why the Conservative party is still level-pegging with the Opposition, who should be way ahead, is that the Labour party has no credible economic plan to try to lift us out of our national debt, except for borrowing more, spending more and raising taxes. Who would suffer in that scenario? Would it be us? No, it would be our children and grandchildren, because we would be loading that debt on to them. Of course, as the national debt increased under Labour’s plans, interest rates would rise even more and mortgages would become more expensive. Who would suffer? The young who want to get mortgages. Labour Members’ policies simply do not add up. Until they come face to face with reality, they will never become the Government of this country.

7.26 pm

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): The Chancellor spoke for more than an hour last Wednesday, but he did not mention several of the most pressing issues for my constituents. Particularly notable was the lack of any mention of additional money for social care, despite the Government’s saying in the general election that they would fix social care. The Care Quality Commission has said the system is at “tipping point”, yet the Government did not allocate any more money to social care through the Budget. Funding an additional amount through council tax is simply not enough. Nor was there any mention of help for the many WASPI women in this country.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dr Blackman-Woods: I apologise, but I am short of time and lots of people want to speak.

The theme of this debate is the UK and the world, which is apt, because the Chancellor was unable to hide how badly the British economy is doing, especially compared with the economies of our global competitors. The most recent OECD forecasts have UK GDP growth as the third lowest out of the 35 member nations. Our productivity is among the lowest, too, and that is stifling our economic growth. In recent years, productivity growth
has underperformed every forecast made by the Office for National Statistics and the OBR, and last Wednesday the Chancellor was forced to admit that it has been flatlining for years. The Trades Union Congress put it really well when it said:

“Our workplaces are not fit for the future: UK productivity has flatlined for a decade, and we are ill-equipped to take advantage of new technological developments. Poor quality employment practices, weak enforcement of labour rights and low investment in training leave British companies lagging behind.”

We know what the Government should be doing to tackle the productivity crisis. They need to invest in skills and education, in technology and digital services, and in infrastructure right across the piece—everything from roads to ports to airports and housing. They also need to get companies to invest more in research and development. However, the Budget was weak on several of those issues. It is unclear whether the £20 million announced for further education colleges is new money and we do not know when they will get it. We all know that apprenticeships are a great way to upskill the workforce, but the Government’s record on them is poor. Statistics from the Department for Education show that there has been a 60% drop in the number of people starting apprenticeships.

Little new money was announced in the Budget for transport and infrastructure, especially in our regions. Most of the money is still concentrated in London and the south-east. Although we do not want to take money away from those areas, we do want the Government to recognise the very real need for additional investment in infrastructure, particularly in the north-east, so that businesses can continue to grow.

We also know that the money that was announced for housing—£7 billion of new funding—is massively short of the £50 billion that the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government said was needed. This Budget continues the Government’s failed austerity policy and does nothing for my constituency.

7.30 pm

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): This Budget is outward looking and is designed not only to weather any potential storms from Brexit, but to seize the opportunities that they may bring for us as a global-facing country.

There has been some talking down of our economy recently, and, specifically, in this Chamber today. It would be foolish and naive to oversell the economic state of the country, but it is crucial that we stop this negative Britain bashing. It is damaging our economy, our morale and our ability to attract inward investment.

Let us remind ourselves of some of the key facts: the UK has now seen 19 consecutive quarters of continuous economic growth; employment is up by 279,000 from a year ago; and another 600,000 people are forecast to be in work by 2022. In Chippenham, my constituency, youth unemployment has fallen from 7.5% in 2012 to 2.5% now. The number of VAT-registered businesses has risen by more than 2% in the past tax year alone. Yes, the growth forecast for 2017 has been reduced from 2% to 1.5%, and forecasts for 2018 to 2021 have been revised down, but the reality is that the economy is still growing. It is irresponsible and incorrect to suggest otherwise. Moreover, it is the predicted rate of growth that has been revised down. The key words there are “predicted” and “growth”. The post-Brexit figures are, in fact, far better than some have predicted. The real worry here is the productivity lag, which we need to fix. The Budget highlighted the Government’s understanding of that and the need to target it, which seems to have been omitted and overlooked by the Opposition.

We have invested half a trillion pounds in our infrastructure since 2010, and the Budget builds on that, including transport measures to help productivity. The Budget also announced the largest boost to research and development support for 40 years, with a further £2.3 billion investment from the National Productivity Investment Fund. The Budget means investment in our digital infrastructure. The increase of the National Productivity Investment Fund to £30 billion will help investment in technologies such as artificial intelligence and driverless cars. It will have an impact up and down the country, particularly in my constituency in AB Dynamics, and in Dyson, which is across the border in North Wiltshire.

Investing in and fostering skills is vital to productivity, but they have to be the right skills for our economic success, which is why the Budget’s focus on T-levels, mathematics and computer science, is so important. As an aside, I look forward to the long-anticipated publication of the careers strategy, which I hope will foster a greater link between careers advice and the labour market’s needs and predictions. By continuing to make work pay, this Budget will also help productivity. I am talking about the increase in the personal tax allowance to £11,850 and an increase in the national living wage by 4.4%.

In conclusion, we are the fifth biggest economy in the world. Since 2010, we have 1 million more businesses that are creating jobs. We are the fifth largest exporter in the world and the top destination for inward investment in Europe. Let us not talk down Britain or our growing economy. As I said at the beginning of my remarks, that is irresponsible and incorrect. Yes, there is much that we need to do to foster growth, but this Budget recognises that and focuses on targeting the productivity lag. It is a plan for Britain of which we can continue to be proud.

7.34 pm

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): This Budget was a huge wasted opportunity as well as an acknowledgement of failure. Those of us who listened to the Foreign Secretary’s speech today were staggered that he spent longer talking about penguins and plastic bags than he did acknowledging Brexit, the most serious threat to our economy. I was one of those MPs who campaigned for remain but found that their constituents voted leave. I am willing to go out there and say to my constituents that I will support their vote, but we need to have a sense from the Government that there is a plan and a basic competence in the negotiations that they are carrying out on Britain’s behalf. The Government need to seize the moment—as huge as it is—and show us that they are on top of the opportunities that exist. They are now making ludicrous claims, for example, that we could not nationalise the trains if we stayed in the EU. Such claims are utterly discredited and suggest that they have nothing left to say about how to make Brexit work.
I was elected in May 2010 on a programme that promised to halve the deficit by 2015 and to eradicate it by 2020. That plan was ridiculed by the Tories as inadequate—they said that it would consign our children to a lifetime of paying down debt. That now seems wildly optimistic compared with the performance of this Government. This evening, we heard the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) talking about debt as though he was not a member of a party that has increased our debt by half a trillion pounds since 2010. The Government have no credibility on the deficit or on debt. In 2010, they told us that it would be gone by 2015. By 2014, it was going to be gone by 2018. Now we are told that it might be gone by 2025. I am willing to bet my house that, by 2025, this country will still have a deficit. The Tories have no credibility when talking about the deficit. Now we have a Budget that fails to address any of the key questions that might see our economy moving in a more positive direction.

There was nothing in the Budget about social care, the local government crisis, and the inadequate investment in the NHS. Schools in deprived areas are facing a real funding crisis. This Budget could have championed a real growth programme, with infrastructure investment of the sort that we will need to make Britain a more attractive place in which to invest in future. We could have had that at a time when apprenticeship starts are collapsing. The Budget has failed the test of the moment.

There was also a failure to recognise the need to make universal credit work for people who are not close to work. I welcome some of the measures that have been taken to alleviate organisational failures, but universal credit does not work for the self-employed and it is positively cruel for the disabled. In questions last week, I heard the protestations of the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), who recognises that his legacy is being tarnished. The actions on housing and homelessness were also utterly inadequate.

The tragedy of this Budget is the tragedy of this Government. They are out of ideas, more interested in their own survival than the national interest, and unable to grasp the size of the moment that a combination of the tides of history and their own ineptitude has brought upon us all. When we needed investment and innovation, we got obfuscation and confusion. When we needed decisive action to rescue universal credit, we got a partial tidy-up of failures that never should have happened. There was nothing on social care and nothing on the NHS. The Budget is a catastrophe for our schools and the deficit will now last till the end of never. This was a failed Budget from a failing Government who really have run out of ideas. It is time for them to step aside for a party that has not.

7.38 pm

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): I am grateful for the chance to contribute to a debate about the kind of country that we seek to build in the exciting new era before us. Too often, Britain’s decision to leave the EU has been mischaracterised as a backlash against modernity, and the reflex of a nation still mourning an imperial past. Now is the time to counter that miserable misperception with an unashamed vigour and a sense of urgency. We shall need both UK businesses and Government to engage with one another as never before, understanding that neither the private nor the public sector alone is a panacea in addressing the challenges and seizing the global opportunities ahead. The launch today of our industrial strategy marks a positive step down that road and builds on the foundations laid by this Budget.

Last week, the Chancellor recognised that strategic infrastructure will play a critical role in unlocking housing and economic development and connecting us to new opportunities overseas. The Government have already committed themselves to delivering the lower Thames crossing, which will not only open up new pockets of housing development, but link to state-of-the-art port and logistics facilities in nearby London Gateway and Tilbury Port, and to the expanding London City airport and continental crossings in Essex and Kent. I am working with the Department for International Trade and businesses in my constituency to take advantage of these local trade routes by exploiting UK Export Finance, improving exporters’ access to capital and enabling suppliers to fulfil new orders. Meanwhile, by lifting housing revenue account borrowing caps for councils in high demand areas, my local council in Havering will be able to take advantage of Crossrail’s arrival by maximising the benefits of its ambitious housing and estate regeneration scheme.

The new spirit of collaboration extends to the increasing interaction between our schools, universities and public services, opening commercial opportunities at home and abroad. I recently returned from Guangzhou in China, where I visited a high-tech women and children’s hospital that is working with academics at the University of Birmingham in genetic research and new medical technology. Opportunities abound to build even deeper economic ties with China and other international allies in this field through knowledge transfer partnerships and our new international research strategy. The NHS’s sheer buying power, the Government’s commitment in this Budget to higher research and development spending, a large and hyper-diverse patient group in cities such as London, and collaboration between universities and health services all create the ideal environment for international investors in the UK and the potential for more exportable expertise.

I welcome the Budget’s emphasis on productivity and technology, particularly the additional resource for lifelong learning, computing and the core subject of maths. However, a number of my constituents have expressed concern that the focus on core subjects such as maths is leading to the neglect of non-core subjects in our schools such as art, design and technology, and the humanities. This could risk skills shortages in our world-beating creative industries—sectors that have benefited enormously from targeted tax credits in recent years, and from which we derive enormous soft power.

Finally, a truly competitive global Britain must be one that nurtures our competitive advantage in services. For all the promise of the EU single market, provisions for services and digital technology are far from advanced. We have an enormous opportunity, should we secure a trade deal with the likes of the United States, to set out comprehensive agreements on services that could act as a template for global standards and regulation, particularly in new technologies.

I welcome this Budget and its complementary industrial strategy for their recognition that a truly global Britain will be one that invests in the kind of collaborative
partnerships that transform the knowledge of our private and public sectors into growth and prosperity for our citizens.

7.42 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): In 2011, the Conservative-led Government imposed a two-year pay freeze on public sector pay. In 2015, they imposed a maximum 1% rise for four years from 2016-17 onwards. The large number of letters and emails from my constituents in Slough highlight the strength of public concern. Indeed, an online petition launched by Unison calling for an end to the pay cap has more than 145,000 signatures. The Government have claimed that the pay cap has ended, yet the Chancellor announced nothing in his autumn Budget to give public sector workers the increase that they so deserve. The workers need an increase, and we all need them to have it. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has warned that if the cap remains, the public sector will “struggle to recruit and retain the workers it needs to deliver public services, and the quality of those services will therefore be at risk.”

Seven years into the public sector pay squeeze, our worst fears have been realised. Real-terms cuts to public sector pay are failing not just workers, but everyone who relies on these vital services. The cap and funding cuts have created a recruitment and retention crisis, meaning that we will all end up paying more in the end. The Government announced the cap and they have defended it on two grounds—that public sector pay remains attractive compared to the private sector, and that it is unaffordable to provide decent pay rises. However, neither argument stands. Just over a month ago, the Treasury’s own figures revealed that public sector wages had dipped below the private sector for the first time since before the financial crisis. Data showed that workers in the public sector were paid an average of 0.6% less than their private sector counterparts in similar positions, whereas the Treasury estimated in 2010 that public sector workers were 5.8% better paid than those in comparable roles in the private sector.

Recent research from the Institute for Public Policy Research has shown that if public sector pay was raised by inflation, 43% of the cost would be reclaimed by the Treasury through taxation, lower welfare payments and higher GDP growth—a boost of £800 million in the year 2019-20. Indeed, those sums could be reinvested in public services. If all 5 million public sector workers were granted a pay rise of 3%, the extra cost to the Treasury—over and above the Government’s already promised 1%—would be just over £3 billion a year. That is not a generous pay rise, and would not compensate for years of cuts in real wages. However, it would enable public sector workers to keep up with inflation. As if the pay cap had not crushed morale enough for these vital workers, the Government’s preparations for Brexit are placing additional strains on our public services. It is predicted that the extra inflation created by Brexit will cost the average public sector worker more than an extra £1,000 in real wage losses.

The UK’s public services keep the country on the road. Public sector workers already do more than anyone could reasonably ask of them. A pay rise for nurses, paramedics, fire officers and police officers is fair and affordable. I urge the Minister to take heed and do what is necessary for our nation’s interest.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): It is a privilege to have the opportunity to speak. I congratulate the Chancellor on the Budget. This Budget, with one apparently small tax change—a first in the world—is predicted to inject £40 billion into our economy. That is important to the UK and monumental to the Scottish economy. Scottish Conservative colleagues and I have relentlessly lobbied Treasury Ministers on that change. Following on from my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), I believe that this was a good Budget for Scotland. I am, of course, referring to transferable tax history for the oil and gas industry, the measures on VAT relief for the Scottish police and fire services, and the measures on whisky and spirits. Twelve Scottish Back Benchers, an excellent Secretary of State for Scotland and our Holyrood colleagues were very convincing—perhaps as convincing as the DUP.

I will focus on the global opportunities of oil and gas. The industry still employs 300,000 people in the UK and it has produced a staggering 40 billion barrels of oil. The oil and gas industry has been a huge contributor, and that is far from over. UK production met 79% of the UK’s oil demand and 53% of gas demand in 2016. Now, imagine how the Germans feel about being supplied with Russian gas. So it is globally significant to us that the North sea is still of such importance.

The sector has contributed massively to our engineering skills and has huge global opportunities. The UK continental shelf is one of the most challenging offshore basins, and UK technology has spread throughout the world. In my constituency, we have STATS Group, which is a pipeline intervention company based in Kintore; Hoover Ferguson, which is now a global company; and Wood Group, which started in the north-east and has now become a £5 billion company following a merger with Amec Foster Wheeler. The Treasury has helped to create the most fiscally attractive place to produce oil and gas. That is recognised by Shell and BP, as well as newcomers such as Chrysaor, which recently invested £3.8 billion in the North sea. Let us not believe the myth that it is all over for the North sea.

Transferable tax history for the oil and gas industry could be a game-changer. Those who depend on oil and gas for their livelihoods will be celebrating. They are not the fat cats portrayed by the Labour party, and they are all too often overtaxed by the Scottish Government. Decommissioning is tax deductible, so the measure is transformative. The relief is from November 2018. I have spent my entire working life immersed in corporate finance, so I know that getting this right is very important. The Treasury must be commended for not acting too quickly. The industry has turned around its record on safety and the environment, and it is important that we recognise our continued dependency on the oil and gas industry because it is playing its part in decarbonising the UK and the rest of the world. Oil will also continue to dominate transport.

What is important about this investment is that it is leading growth. New players can improve productivity, which that investment ushers in. The investment is also a boost to the industry’s global reach and to Britain’s global reach, and it boosts inward investment.
At this time, during the Brexit negotiations, the oil and gas industry should be a beacon to British industry. It is global Britain at its best.

7.50 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Today’s debate on the Budget started with a focus on foreign affairs but, in the light of the fact that we are watching our economy rapidly contract as a result of the chaotic Brexit this Government are presiding over, it is right that I focus on the NHS, not least due to the Foreign Secretary’s failed promise that the NHS would receive £350 million every week—he even had the nerve to come to my constituency with that bus to announce that, but my constituents had the good sense to ignore him.

The unravelling Budget statement has demonstrated that the Chancellor’s insistence, despite seven years of economic failure, on continuing with austerity, which continues to fail services and communities, is staggering. Growth—down; productivity—down; and wages—down. Austerity is hurting so many people: wage cuts for our public servants, social security cuts for disabled people, and 4 million people living in poverty, including children. Many of them are without a home, many are on the streets, and far too many children and adults are suffering mental distress—and there was nothing in the Budget to support them.

York is particularly hard hit. Rocketing house prices mean that people need nine and a half times their wages to buy a property, and average wages fall far below the national average. Buying a house has now been made worse by this Budget. Renting privately is out of reach, and the number of homes for social rent is falling, while homelessness is rising.

I must ask why York schools have moved from being the seventh worst funded to the very worst funded, and why the most economically deprived areas in York are receiving the greatest cuts—yes, less money. York kids deserve the very best, and I will fight for their futures. As for jobs and infrastructure, the scale of private and public sector cuts is hurting York. I urge the Government to intervene: stop the closure of our barracks as a first step—there are 1,600 jobs there that we urgently need.

I also have to ask those on the Treasury Bench what happened to the business rate consultation we were all promised at the last Budget. While York traders work hard, we cannot ignore the severe challenges that business rates present. It is a broken system, and page 188 of the industrial strategy does not assist.

Now, back to the NHS. The Government have placed York in the capped expenditure process. There needs to be an acknowledgment that the funding formula, historically and currently, leaves a £20 million to £25 million funding gap in the health economy. That is after severe rationing, smart prescribing and a move to non-hospital patient case management. The leaders in the health economy have done everything to stem the costs, yet, before the winter, the money has run out, and the trust is in the distressed cash regime, having to take out a loan, with interest, to pay back who knows when or how. We need to make sure this issue is addressed because, under the NHS constitution, they cannot make further cuts. The issue in York is an ageing demographic with co-morbidities—frail people needing vital urgent care.

Will the Minister use some of the paltry £2.8 billion announced for the NHS in the Budget to address this crisis?

There was no mention of social care last Wednesday from the Chancellor, when 1.9 million older people are living in poverty. Economic and health inequality are linked. Please take care of our older people; it is a national scandal that, in the sixth richest country in the world, more than 40,000 older people are dying each year of the cold. These precious lives, well lived, have paid into the system. These lives could be saved.

If this Government have no capacity to help the poor and the vulnerable, or to meet need and to invest in our services and our economy, there is one answer: Labour.

7.54 pm

Rishi Sunak (Richmond (Yorks)) (Con): Global Britain can be built only on the foundation of sound public finances. That is why, for me, one number above all in the Budget stood out: next year, our debt percentage will start falling. Finally, we can see through to the time when the country will stop borrowing and live within its means again.

Fiscal responsibility is not just an ideological pursuit. Without a prudent approach to borrowing and debt, ordinary people pay the price. They pay it through slower growth, less fiscal resilience and interest rates that begin to climb. Let me start with growth.

As Government borrowing grows, it crowds out the lending available to British businesses to expand and invest. The results of these things around the world are clear. On average, economies with debt exceeding 90% of GDP grow 1 percentage point slower than those where it is between 30% and 90%, and 2 percentage points slower than those where it is below 30%. If it were not for the actions of this Government, our nation’s debt would already have spiralled well beyond 90%. Although a 1 percentage point hit to growth does not sound like a lot, it would be £100 billion in GDP, and £40 billion less to the Treasury’s coffers.

If the argument on lower growth was not enough, higher borrowing has other costs too. Unless we build resilience in public finances, the economy will not have the flexibility to respond to future economic slowdowns. The consequences could be severe. Italy entered its recession with debt at 100% of GDP. Since then, its defence budget has been cut by 12%, Portugal’s debt was 70% of GDP. In the last five years, education has been cut by 16%. And then there is Greece: its debt was 100% of GDP, and the result was a health budget cut in half. In Britain, we are investing record amounts in our schools, our military and our NHS. If we do not get debt under control now, while the economy is growing, we will not able to maintain this record when the going gets tough again.

I turn to interest rates. In modern times, the average 10-year gilt yield has been 5%—four times higher than what we are currently paying to borrow. This situation will not last forever. Also, the more we borrow, the less confidence markets might have in our ability to repay, and the faster those rate rises will come. We already spend more on debt interest than we do on the police and our armed forces combined. As our interest rates rise, that means less for schools, hospitals and welfare. But it is not only the Government who pay when rates
go up—it is ordinary people, with their mortgages, their credit cards and their bank loans. A 1 percentage point hit means £1,000 on mortgages a year.

This is a disciplined Budget delivered by a Chancellor who believes in the importance of fiscal responsibility, and I commend it to the House.

7.57 pm

Emma Dent Coad (Kensington) (Lab): I would like to return to a subject very much on the minds of my constituents: the vexed and highly emotive one of Government funding for retrofitting sprinklers in high-rise flats, which I feel is being sidelined. It is being decided on a case-by-case basis, and we understand that many councils are being refused this vital funding.

What kind of future are we planning for our children? What kind of society shovels money into the overseas accounts of the tax-dodging wealthy while refusing a safe home to those who create that wealth? This is the world our local poet Potent Whisper calls “Grenfell Britain”. In this Grenfell Britain, we give tax breaks to the rich for their empty investment flats, all fitted with sprinklers, but there is barely a penny towards retrofitting sprinklers in fully occupied high-rise homes that house those who are the engine room of our economy.

In this Grenfell Britain, this Government continue to find ways to avoid their responsibilities. For four years, the Government ignored the recommendations of the Lakanal inquest, after six people perished—11 pages that could have saved 71 lives. They are continuing to ignore the pleas of survivors, evacuees and other affected families for them to provide safe homes for everyone, even after 71 of our neighbours died in the most horrific circumstances—many in front of our eyes. Altogether, that is 857 people made homeless.

What am I to tell Hamid, who is thankful that his 90-year-old mother, whom he cares for, was with relatives that night? Both were made homeless by the fire. What can I say to this proud, hard-working man, who had his business and was proud to say that he paid his taxes and paid for himself and his mother’s care? What can I tell this man who saved the life of his neighbour, a good friend of mine who had predicted the atrocity? Hamid and his disabled mother are still living in a hotel after five and a half months. Most recently they were offered a flat five storeys up, when he had expressly said that, owing to trauma, he must have a ground-floor flat. Instead, he was offered a flat with one staircase and one lift—a brand-new flat with no sprinklers.

What am I to tell the father of two little girls, both lost in the fire along with his wife? The loving father who was determined to say goodbye to his children, who opened those little white coffins to say goodbye to a few tiny remains—what do I say to him: that they died in vain? What do I say to the family who dragged their disabled relative down innumerable flights of stairs past their neighbours who had collapsed there, to the woman who lost her baby, or to the one who had had her baby, back in temporary accommodation after her return from hospital?

What do I tell the people who survived this atrocity and fear for the lives of others? “No change. The Government will not take responsibility.” Tax breaks for the rich; no sprinklers for the rest”? This Government need to understand that decent people who pay their taxes—across Kensington and across the country, of all political parties—are disgusted by the shameful and inadequate response to the ongoing humanitarian disaster at Grenfell Tower, and by the shameful refusal of the Government to adopt recommendations to fit sprinklers and to fund it. Shame on this Government. Listen to the people; find your humanity. Grenfell Britain is your legacy—let us change it.

8.1 pm

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I am pleased to be able to contribute to tonight’s debate on the Budget. I want to highlight three main areas: the support for electric vehicles; the additional funding for STPs—sustainability and transformation partnerships—and the NHS; and the funding for HS2 infrastructure.

First, I welcome the Government’s ambition for the UK to be world leader in electric cars, thus contributing so cleverly to the global Britain. It is a great ambition. However, a local independent garage owner in my constituency, Jonathan Wright, shared with me the level of concern that he is hearing from other garage owners about the cost of retraining their mechanics in the new technology of hybrids. I ask the Minister to consider what measures could be put in place to plug the black hole in hybrid technology training, not just for the new apprentices coming through but for the existing workforce who are going to be so crucial if we are to move forward at the rate that we expect with new technology for our vehicles.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Maggie Throup: No, because I am short of time.

Secondly, on health and social care, I, like other Conservative Members, welcome the £2.8 billion of additional resource funding for the NHS in England. I was saddened by the comments of the hon. Members for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) and for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins), who are no longer in their places, and the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), who still is. I ask them to read the Chancellor’s speech, because he committed £2.6 billion to sustainability and transformation partnerships—programmes that help people to stay in their own homes and in the community, and try to keep them out of hospital. That, to me, is social care. Just because we have not labelled it as social care does not mean that it is not social care. I am delighted that the Chancellor took on board my submission for the additional STP funding. We can only make the desired switch from the acute setting to the community setting with the appropriate transitional funding. I am sure that the additional £2.6 billion of funding that has been allocated will be well spent. This principle of providing care in our communities makes me believe that Derbyshire County Council’s threat of closure of Hazelwood care home in Ilkeston in my constituency is completely wrong. Ill-thought-through actions such as closures of care homes threaten the viability of STPs and must not be allowed to happen. STPs are a crucial part of our future.

Thirdly, I want to touch on the £300 million support for infrastructure for HS2. Again, I am delighted that the Chancellor recognised my submission on this. Only by
investing in more than just the train line itself will the true potential of HS2 be unlocked. I would appreciate more details on this funding. With Erewash and, in particular, Long Eaton, Sandiacre and Stanton Gate being dramatically impacted by HS2, I could spend the whole £300 million in Erewash alone, but I am sure that I will not be allowed to. My shopping list for this money is quite long. It includes acquiring land for business relocation, acquiring land for new homes where these made homeless by HS2 can be rehoused, a new motorway junction at junction 25A of the M1, and improving the existing road infrastructure to ensure that it can cope with the additional traffic that HS2 will undoubtedly bring to the area. I welcome the measures in the Budget and commend it to the House.

8.5 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): It never ceases to amaze me just how complacent many Government Ministers and those in the political leadership of this country appear to be with regard to addressing the underlying economic catastrophe that the country is facing. To paraphrase Kipling, “If you can keep your head when all around you are losing theirs, you probably don’t appreciate the seriousness of the situation.” There is now an amazing disconnect between their arrogance and glibness—and in the case of the Foreign Secretary, bombast and pomposity as well—and the real economic facts on the ground that are shaping the lives of millions of citizens of this country. This is not so much about driverless cars as a driverless Government.

We look now at the global dimension of this Budget. The first thing we should consider is the image of this country in the world. What does this Budget say about our character? How will others judge us for it? How will they judge a country that now lies 31st of 34 OECD countries in the economic growth table? How will they judge a country where, by their own admission, the judge a country that now lies 31st of 34 OECD countries in the economic growth table? How will they judge a country where, by their own admission, the
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They then see a Conservative Government with a proven seven-year track record who have created 3 million more jobs, cut taxes, taken 4 million people out of tax altogether and made Britain a great place to do business once again. The shadow Chancellor may not do numbers, but we know it is the British people who would pay the price if Labour was ever allowed to implement its reckless plans.

This Budget and the ones before it have laid the foundations for our future. In terms of global Britain, we have always been a country that has taken the lead, and I believe it was on that basis that the Chancellor made his remarks about single-use plastic items, which are littering our planet and oceans. It is important to investigate how changes and the tax system can reduce waste. The measure is not intend to raise revenue or to contribute to funding our public services. As someone who spent 30 years in the plastic food service industry, I know that the industry will respond positively to the calls for evidence. Any intervention must be effective and evidence-based. It must maximise rates of recycling and minimise the amount of valuable and recyclable material that is lost to the environment. A key question will be: will this reduce plastic in the ocean? I fear that such measures will make little difference, because just 2% of plastic waste in our oceans originates in Europe and the US, and about 0.2% is litter that originated in the UK. This issue needs to be tackled globally, and we need to address the areas of greatest leakage.

In that context, I want to pick up the point that the Chancellor made about incentivising cleaner air through changes to vehicle excise duty to encourage people to switch to electric vehicles. That will be important in urban areas. In my constituency, we are building the new electric version of the traditional London taxi, urban areas. In my constituency, we are building the new electric version of the traditional London taxi, and I know that the industry will respond positively to the calls for evidence. Any intervention must be effective and evidence-based. It must maximise rates of recycling and minimise the amount of valuable and recyclable material that is lost to the environment. A key question will be: will this reduce plastic in the ocean? I fear that such measures will make little difference, because just 2% of plastic waste in our oceans originates in Europe and the US, and about 0.2% is litter that originated in the UK. This issue needs to be tackled globally, and we need to address the areas of greatest leakage.

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We have a strong economy and world-class public services. The Budget builds on the successes of the past seven years.

8.14 pm

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): Whatever else we might have expected in the Chancellor’s Budget statement, the significant infrastructure investment that we need to enable us to compete on the world stage post Brexit would have been welcome. The private sector is not set up to invest in our transport infrastructure, so if the Government will not do that, British industry and trade will continue to be hampered by poor communications and logistics. On the other hand, a really radical level of investment in our roads and railways would not only provide the stimulus that our construction sector needs, but make it physically possible for British firms to transport their goods to market at a reasonable rate.

More than 4 million 20-foot equivalent container units go through Felixstowe port every year. It handles 40% of the country’s container traffic and is by far the biggest port. Sixty per cent. of the trade through Felixstowe comes from the midlands and the north, so any Government who were serious about enabling trade with the rest of the world would ensure that the transport connections to Felixstowe were as modern and effective as possible.

The A14 around Cambridge and Huntingdon is in the process of being completely rebuilt, at a cost of around £1.5 billion. That is very welcome, but there are various other weak points along the A14 that the Government are not addressing, and they ought to be. The junction between the A14 and the A12 is not fit for purpose and we urgently need a fully grade-separated junction at that point. Above all, when the Orwell bridge has to be closed, thousands of articulated lorries are forced through Ipswich town centre, sometimes taking in excess of three hours to traverse the town. Quite apart from the terrible disruption to the life of my constituents whenever that occurs, can we begin to imagine the cost to business of having all those lorries and goods sitting idly in traffic jams in Ipswich? It is time for an Ipswich northern bypass, which would enable trade to continue to flow freely to our most important port. That is not just a parochial ask; it is about our nation’s ability to trade.

If the road route to Felixstowe is unsatisfactory, the rail route is seriously wanting. Various improvements have been made to it over the years, but it should be the premier rail freight line in the country. Hutchison Ports has made great strides in trying to get as much of its freight on to rail as possible, but it is constrained by the state of the line. It sends around 30% of its containers by rail, but it could double that if the line were up to scratch. Significant parts of the line are single track. There are several unsatisfactory junctions, especially at Haughley, Ely and Leicester, and the whole line is operated by diesel-hauled locomotives, which are more expensive to run than electric ones and far more polluting of the environment. I have been told by rail freight experts that if that one line were electrified, it would provide the kick-start needed to convert our rail freight to electric haulage, and to make a step change in the economic viability of rail freight.

Because the line is so unsatisfactory, a significant proportion of the freight between Felixstowe and the midlands has to travel into London, round on the north London line and out again. It would cost around £1 billion to have a first-rate rail line linking our main port to the midlands, which is in contrast to the 50 times as much that is being spent on HS2. Whenever such proposals are raised, however, the response is always, “Ah, but there is not enough money.” We cannot afford not to invest in transport, and we particularly cannot afford not to invest in rail freight. It is time for comprehensive investment in our transport infrastructure, but the Budget provides only enough funds for tinkering at the edges.

8.18 pm

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): The delivery of the British Budget is one of the most important political events of the year. As an accountant—I refer to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests—and a new MP, I was extremely humbled to witness its delivery at first hand from these Benches. The Budget is even more important considering Britain’s place in the world, the pace of technological change, and the geopolitical shifts that we have witnessed from America, the middle east and China. There is a disturbing rise in negative politics.
With divisive referendums, resurgent nationalism and challenges to the western model of economic management, there is a feeling that we are stepping backwards. We are naïve if we think that such discourse has an impact only on politicians, as was illustrated on my recent trip to Lornshill Academy in my constituency, whose students talked about how Donald Trump’s views had started to shape debate in their school—and not for the better.

That is why the cautiously optimistic Budget delivered by the Chancellor is so important. As many colleagues will appreciate, a Budget is not just an accounting exercise; it is a statement of political intent. I believe that this Budget speaks volumes. It commits the Government to raising the national minimum wage, especially for younger workers. The increase by 5% for such workers is the largest in 10 years.

**David Linden:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Luke Graham:** No.

The Budget has introduced a new railcard for 26 to 30-year-olds, helping those already in work and progressing their careers. It also addresses some of the issues raised by me and other hon. Members about the implementation of universal credit. It builds on the Government’s record on jobs and our success in lowering corporation tax, which has encouraged businesses while bringing in a record £55.6 billion to use in tackling the deficit and investing in our public services.

The Government’s action on tax evasion and compliance has been furthered in the Budget. As a member of the Public Accounts Committee who sat through its hearing on VAT fraud, I welcome the Chancellor’s measures to extend HMRC’s powers to make online marketplaces jointly and severally liable for the unpaid VAT of overseas traders on their platforms. That move that will bring about greater equity for British traders and increase our tax take.

The Budget was good in introducing measures to support all the regions and nations of the United Kingdom. I was pleased that the Chancellor was able to deliver approximately £35 million a year extra for police and fire services in Scotland, changing regulations to undo the damage done by the SNP, because of its obsession with centralisation, that has cost police and fire services in Scotland £140 million. It was warned and advised not to take such action, and even Conservative colleagues in Holyrood changed their position when they saw the costs of centralisation and the impact it would have on services. Despite that, it has taken Westminster to fix the problem—but that is the benefit of being four nations, but one country united together.

**Jim Shannon:** The Government’s central economic strategy and industrial strategy have, in conjunction with the Northern Ireland Assembly, reduced unemployment in my constituency from 5.6% to 3.4%. That is good news, and I suggest that this Government should continue to work with regional Assemblies and keep on reducing unemployment.

**Luke Graham:** It is true that there has been a good story for lower unemployment, and it shows that the Government’s financial and industrial strategies compare very favourably with the SNP’s lack of an education strategy, and certainly its lack of a health strategy. Scotland has gone from No. 1 to No. 3 on education in the United Kingdom.

I was pleased to hear the Chancellor confirm the Treasury’s commitment to the Tay Cities and Stirling and Clackmannanshire city deals, which will have a transformative impact on the two council areas in my constituency. They will bring investment to South Perthshire, Kinross-shire and Clackmannanshire. I am supporting proposals from community groups and businesses to boost long-term economic activity in my constituency.

**Spirit:** are also very significant in my constituency. I have 20% of matured Scotch whisky in my constituency, so hon. Members might want to come and visit. Last week’s freeze in duty not only reassured the industry domestically, but signalled internationally that the UK will support its home brands and is ready for more international trade. [Interruption.] If the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) wants to intervene, he should stand up. I believe that having Scotch whisky in the vanguard will lead to more productive trade meetings with colleagues from around the world.

Opposition Members have made increasing criticisms of the Government in virtually every area of policy. While there has been criticism, there have been very few constructive alternatives. The Budget tackles honestly some of the tough challenges we face, for example by lowering growth forecasts to face the global and domestic reality while putting in place practical measures, such as £2.3 billion for investment and research to tackle our productivity problem. All these positive measures have been constructively argued for and delivered by Conservative Members.

**David Linden:** Given the amount of influence that the hon. Gentleman says the Scottish Conservatives have at Westminster, what is he doing about asking the Chancellor to abolish the two-child policy and rape clause?

**Luke Graham:** That is not the topic for this debate. We have seen such influence, and we have delivered. We have delivered the VAT back for the police, and we have delivered on transferable tax histories. We have done more in six months than SNP Members have managed to do in two and a half years, and certainly a lot more than the SNP has managed to do in its 10 years in government at Holyrood.

The Budget does not deliver everything, but it takes steps to address domestic challenges and to ensure that we are ready for more international competition. For the students in my constituency, it shows that a difference can be made in politics—and a positive one at that.

**8.24 pm**

**Ms Marie Rimmer** (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): As I listened to the Chancellor talk about driverless cars in the Budget speech last week, what struck me was how few of his measures will help the residents in St Helens, Whiston and Prescot in my constituency. He said nothing about the fact that we are facing the longest fall in our living standards on record. A reasonably waged family in my constituency with two children will be £800 worse off every year after 2021.

There was nothing in the Chancellor’s speech about securing a long-term solution for funding care for our older and vulnerable people. There was no additional...
funding for care packages, and our elderly and disabled still face savage cuts from the £10 million general grant reduction announced in previous Budgets. Despite the council raising the social care precept of 3% for this year and next year, with £2.5 million from previous years, there was no additional funding to meet the ever growing demand for social care year on year. The slight increase in funding to help cope with the annual winter crisis at A&E and their advisers. are not acting now against companies that hoard building brownfield land regeneration funding, the Government at £300,000, and because the Chancellor has abolished 0.5% of my constituents would be able to buy a property. The stamp duty change will channel much of our help with the deposit for a mortgage is no use to a small number of households who can afford such a property worth £300,000. The stamp duty cut to people who have already bought a small terraced property. Knowsley. None of my people earns anything like enough welcome, but we need to be clear that the Chancellor’s although the money will not go that far. Those poor individuals sleeping rough on the streets, the eye-watering £94 million funding taken from St Helens benefits. Of course, nothing was said about replacing the ongoing 3% real annual cut in public services—a Government who care. The Chancellor constituents are petitioning for more police. places free of knives, guns and exploitation, and my These children and vulnerable adults are at high risk of extreme physical and sexual violence, gang recriminations and trafficking. My constituents fully support our police and are trying to rebuild their communities as safe places free of knives, guns and exploitation, and my constituents are petitioning for more police. We need a Government who support the public and public services—a Government who care. The Chancellor said nothing about funding for the police—he did not mention the police—or about how to fight the 20% rise in violent crime given the 22% cuts to frontline policing in Merseyside. He ignored the increases of 19%, in domestic abuse, of 20% in violence and of 26.5%, in rape. There are outstanding prison recalls, and gun and knife crime is increasing. There have been two candlelit vigils for murdered young people in my constituency this weekend. Merseyside exports more organised crime groups and county line issues than any other area in the country. Merseyside police dealt with 8,729 missing people, of whom 64% or 5,601 were aged 16 and under. These children and vulnerable adults are at high risk of extreme physical and sexual violence, gang recriminations and trafficking. My constituents fully support our police and are trying to rebuild their communities as safe places free of knives, guns and exploitation, and my constituents are petitioning for more police. The help for a few young people to buy homes is welcome, but we need to be clear that the Chancellor’s housing proposals will not work in St Helens and Knowsley. None of my people earns anything like enough to buy a property worth £300,000. The stamp duty cut for first-time buyers only works if they are one of the small number of households who can afford such a property. Help with the deposit for a mortgage is no use to people who have already bought a small terraced house that their growing family can no longer fit into. The stamp duty change will channel much of our hard-earned income to those in the south. Less than 0.5% of my constituents would be able to buy a property at £300,000, and because the Chancellor has abolished brownfield land regeneration funding, the Government are not acting now against companies that hoard building land and their advisers. The Budget feels a bit like the Government’s new cars: driverless and heading down the wrong road and on to reckless destruction—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order.
manufacturing excellence and to continue to push our industries to become more internationally competitive. Investing in infrastructure, skills and innovative research will mean greater prosperity, improving the quality of jobs in places such as Stoke-on-Trent.

The Government have worked hard to increase our international tax competitiveness, and to enable smaller businesses to grow and compete with the global players—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I call Angela Smith.

8.32 pm

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I think this is the first time I have spoken in the Chamber while you have been in the Chair.

This Budget debate is quite rightly primarily about Brexit, and the statistics underpinning the Chancellor’s statement last week have to be read in that context. From being one of the fastest growing economies in the G7, we are now joint bottom. Indeed, over the next five years our economy is forecast to grow more slowly even than that of Greece. I could say much more about the statistics. It is of course true that our productivity gap is a major factor in our faltering performance, as it acts as a huge brake on growth. Despite this dreadful situation, investment intentions by businesses are weakening because of uncertainty about the future of the British economy in the context of a shambolic Brexit process. The situation is fragile.

The Budget is based on a positive outlook for negotiations, yet there is a lot of scope for things to go badly wrong. The biggest fear, as far as our wealth creators are concerned, is a cliff-edge Brexit, with the UK leaving on World Trade Organisation rules. That would mean, according to the Chancellor’s own forecasts, the economy emerging at 7.5% smaller by 2030 than it would otherwise have been. Even if the Government secure a Canada-style trade deal, the Treasury estimates that the country will be only around 1% better off than it would leave on WTO rules. It is hardly enticing, is it? Analysis also suggests that trade deals with other countries will add only 5% to our trade, and nowhere near compensate for the 40% reduction in trade consequent on leaving the single market.

The Government need to acknowledge the warning signs sent out by the figures underpinning the Budget. The first and most important response needs to be an acknowledgement that there is no such thing as a bespoke deal. There is only no deal, a trade deal on Canada-like terms as a third country, or continued membership of the single market and the customs union. It is that latter option that promises business certainty for the future, and which will encourage investment and improvements in the country’s productivity, giving the Chancellor—whoever that may be—more room for manoeuvre in future years. Maybe at some time in the future we will have a woman Chancellor making good on our place in the single market. The fear with the present course the Government are following is not only the sheer chaos of it, but the failure to accept the pragmatic view that disruption to our economy must be avoided at all costs.

It is not in the national interest to allow this to happen and the Government should and must act responsibly. Those on both the Government and the Opposition Front Benches should grasp the nettle and accept that membership of the single market and the customs union offers the best deal for Britain.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): This was a good Budget: strong on housebuilding; fair to young people wanting to travel and to young families who want to own their home; credible on the debt and the deficit; and transformative for Teesside.

The north-east lies at the heart of global Britain. We are the only net exporting region of the country. For those who do not know my area, it is hard to overstate the economic and emotional significance of the Redcar steelworks. The fact that they stand cold tonight, rather than producing molten Teesside steel, has felt, for so many and for so long, to be the final indignity for an area that was brought into being to create and has instead often been synonymous with decay. Identity, cohesion and pride are pale words to set alongside overfull hearts about the consequences of what the closure has meant.

There are very few company towns and areas in our country. This was one and it is in that context that the Government’s commitment to the South Tees mayoral development corporation needs to be understood. Our mayor Ben Houchen and the mayoral development corporation board have been working overtime and there have been 60 expressions of interest in the site. This is the most exciting regeneration project in the whole country. The Prime Minister visited in August and we have now received £182 million of investment. That is why it is so powerful a signal that central Government, so profoundly mistrusted and so often derided, are opening the door to a better future so that Teesside is not a charity case, but is able to earn our future on equal terms with the rest of the world.

What cannot be excused, and what I will not forgive, is the reaction of local Labour politicians and the debate they have tried to whip up about the announcement somehow being about recycled funding. They have been so quick to downplay it, to pour cold water on this flicker of hope and this life breathed into the embers of SSI. Not only are they wrong—the fact is that this is new money, as confirmed by the Treasury—but they are damaging. What kind of signal do they send to investors? What kind of message do they send to our constituents? What kind of service do they perform to Teesside?

There is an irony too bitter for words: they are the first and many and for so long, to be the final indignity for an area that was brought into being to create and has instead often been synonymous with decay. Identity, cohesion and pride are pale words to set alongside overfull hearts about the consequences of what the closure has meant.

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The *Evening Gazette* has been running an excellent “Invest in Teesside” initiative. It is time for the whole area—businesses large and small, politicians of all colours and standing—to come forward and wave the flag for Teesside. It is time for optimism in our area.

The latest figures show that the north-east has just set a new record: the highest ever level of employment. Moreover, the number of unemployed people has fallen by almost 10% on a year ago. This is testament to the energy and ingenuity of all the firms I have visited across my constituency. The South Tees mayoral development corporation needs to be supported to flourish, but it is not the limit of our ambition. I have spoken already about carbon capture and storage. I could also mention the new Sirius Minerals mine or free port status for Teessport, which will create huge opportunities in a global world. That is the vision, that is the journey and, for as long as I have any part to play in the future of our area, that is what will be realised.

8.40 pm

**Bambos Charalambous** (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): I wish to focus on three areas of deficiency in the Budget: education, social care and the public sector.

Many schools across the country are struggling financially. The Chancellor, while promising an extra £40 million to train future maths teachers, seems sadly to have missed the point. The Government’s ideologically driven onslaught on education has led to an exodus of teachers, and many schools are now struggling to recruit. More teachers are now leaving the profession than joining it. The Government do not fully understand the low morale of teachers and staff in schools following the underfunding of education by successive Tory-led Governments. Why would any high-calibre maths graduate now choose teaching instead of a job as an analyst in the City making large amounts of money with half the paperwork and stress?

There was nothing in the Budget for primary school funding either. In order to entice students to study maths A-level, the Chancellor has offered a maths premium of £600, but if primary schools are not properly funded, the children could be struggling at secondary school. The £1.3 billion previously announced by the Secretary of State for Education will do nothing to reverse the £2.7 billion of cuts to school budgets since 2015. The Chancellor could have addressed the fact that schools now have to pay more in national insurance and pension contributions than they once did. These are the real issues squeezing schools.

There was also no increase in the budget for special educational needs and disability funding, which has been frozen for several years. Earlier this year, the Local Government Association warned that due to the lack of funding and rising demand, SEND children were at risk of being turned away from mainstream schools. If schools and local authorities cannot meet the needs of SEND children, what are they supposed to do? The sad thing is that the most vulnerable children will suffer, which is totally unacceptable. More investment is urgently needed in this area.

While I am on the subject of the vulnerable, the Chancellor has decided to give insufficient funds to the NHS, rather than the £4 billion that the head of NHS England called for in order to meet the urgent demands faced by the NHS this winter. The Chancellor seems to think that those pressing demands end at the hospital door. He has decided to give nothing for social care, which will no doubt lead to more bed blocking and seriously affect the help that people need coming out of hospital. This is a massive snub to the elderly and those needing social care services. Social care has seen cuts of £6.8 billion over the past seven years, and there is an estimated annual £2.5 billion funding gap.

Once again, there is nothing in the Budget for local authorities, many of which are at breaking point following year-on-year cuts to their budgets since 2010. Social services is the largest area of expenditure for many local authorities, and failure to properly fund it is leading to untold damage and distress to our most vulnerable and often elderly citizens. The Chancellor and the Government seem to be willing to borrow more but not to invest in educating children, supporting the most vulnerable or supporting local services. A sign of a civilised society is how it treats its most vulnerable citizens. Stripping the state to the bone hits the vulnerable first and hardest. The Government are failing our society.

8.44 pm

**Paul Masterton** (East Renfrewshire) (Con): I start by welcoming the news from India about the Chennai Six. I very much hope that those men will be home soon.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to respond to a Budget that does not shy away from the issues facing the nation but sets out a clear, sensible and pragmatic approach to how to tackle them; a Budget that creates a positive vision for the future of our country and invests in it; and a Budget that most of all delivers for Scotland.

I was sent to this place by the people of East Renfrewshire on the back of two clear promises: to oppose a second independence referendum, and to speak out for Scotland’s interests at Westminster. Since 2.38 am on 9 June, that is exactly what I have been doing, and last week’s Budget was the fruition of months of patient, constructive, determined work alongside my Scottish Conservative colleagues. Real progress was delivered, not shouting and screaming from the sidelines, but through talking, discussing and persuading behind the scenes—but then that is the benefit of electing Scottish Conservatives.

We keep Conservatives in Nos. 10 and 11, and we get to step behind the door. We do not have rammies in the street outside; we make our arguments in the corridors of power.

I welcome the freeze in whisky duty, the new tax relief for the oil and gas industry, the commitment to further city and regional growth deals, the clearing up of the SNP’s mess on police and fire VAT, the £2.2 million for Poppyscotland, the £3.3 million for Scottish charities from LIBOR grants, the extension of the rural fuel duty rebate scheme, and the £2 billion of extra funding that is winging its way to Scotland to be spent as the Scottish Government see fit. The truth is that, if it were not for the Scottish Conservatives, the price of a bottle of whisky would be going up. This is a major pre-Brexit boost for one of our most important industries, with exports of more than £4 billion a year. Whisky is the biggest net contributor to the UK in goods, supporting more than 40,000 jobs. I cannot think of a better example of an industry and a brand that speak to a global Britain.
East Renfrewshire is benefiting from £44 million in infrastructure funding as part of the Glasgow region city deal. I know what a difference city deals make to local communities, and I am delighted by the support that has been committed to Tay Cities, Stirling and Clackmannanshire, and the Borderlands growth deal. Those deals demonstrate that Scotland benefits when our two Governments work together, collaborating to deliver jobs and prosperity. They will empower businesses in the areas involved, enabling them to expand their horizons and attract talent from around the globe.

The provision of an additional £2 billion for the Scottish Government to spend as they consider best should be welcome news, but for the SNP, of course, there is no grievance that cannot be manufactured. If they are not complaining about not getting enough money, they are complaining about getting the wrong type of money. The truth is that the Scottish Government have always been happy to use financial transaction funding for affordable housing, business investment, and vital infrastructure projects. When the UK Government use this method, it is devilish smoke and mirrors, but when the Scottish Government use it, it is “a half-billion pound vote of confidence in Scottish business, Scottish workers and the Scottish economy.” Unfortunately for the SNP, Scotland sees that dishonest, hypocritical, grievance-seeking agenda for what it is. Scotland recognises that this Conservative Government have delivered for Scotland.

I welcome the increase in the national living wage, the increase in the personal allowance, the freezing of fuel duty, the transformative investment in research and development to ensure that Britain is at the forefront of technology, and the measures to support small business growth. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) for the work that she has done to bring about the £1.5 billion package of improvement measures for universal credit, which have been welcomed by my local citizens advice bureau in Barrhead and by other branches and organisations throughout the country. I would love to be welcoming the increase in the higher-rate tax band, a change in the approach to business rates and the removal of stamp duty for first-time buyers, but, sadly, they will not apply north of the border—unless, that is, the Scottish Government’s Finance Minister sees some sense.

Scotland’s first Budget, delivered at Westminster, is now complete, and we await the second, from Holyrood, on 14 December. Whatever that may contain, we already know one thing for certain: that 12 brand new Scottish Conservative MPs have delivered more for Scotland in five months than 56 noisy but ultimately useless “Nats” managed to deliver in two years.

8.48 pm

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): The big story from last week’s Budget was clear: there is little room for manoeuvre on the economy unless we improve our productivity. We need to spend only five minutes in the company of anyone from the Institute for Fiscal Studies to see that our downgraded productivity forecasts spell real problems for the UK, particularly as we approach the full force of the Government’s chaotic Brexit.

Britain’s influence in the world has always had at its heart a strong economy, driving trade and growth across the globe. My own constituency of Croydon developed as a town on the principal route between the south coast and London, a gateway to this country since mediaeval times. Competing on the world stage necessitates an economy that the world can work with easily and that it will look up to. Those who enjoy this sort of thing, as I do, will follow the various global country-branding matrices, which always place Britain satisfyingly near the top as a nation brand; but these things shift, and as our economic performance becomes stunted and freedoms of movement and trade are taken away, our reputation as a place in which to work and invest will suffer.

I think we would all agree that productivity holds the key to maintaining and building on our place as a world-leading economy, so how do we help our businesses, and the people employed by them, to become more efficient? There are two clear concerns that we must address before we go any further: the two pillars of education and infrastructure. The correlation between a strong education system and productivity is clear, and it was extremely disappointing to see no significant mention of education in the Budget. My borough of Croydon has the largest number of young people in London. We have 16,000 people in further education or apprenticeships, but I was devastated to hear that the number of apprenticeship starts between May and July fell by 61%.

There is a growing crisis in our schools, which threatens to undermine our local and national economy for a generation. I surveyed over 50 Croydon headteachers recently, and 93% told me that they had been forced to cut staff due to funding. Three quarters had cut teaching assistants and, shockingly, 85% said they had been forced to cut support for children with special educational needs. This is not helping our country’s productivity. In the last Parliament, the Conservatives cut adult education by 47%. This is not helping our country’s productivity. Prospective university students in England are now looking at average debts of an astonishing £50,000—higher than almost anywhere in the developed world. This is not helping our country’s productivity. The Chancellor’s Budget and today’s industrial strategy allocate some money for parts of our education sector, but to avoid real-terms cuts we need billions more in investment just to restore real-terms funding to 2015 levels.

The second pillar of productivity is, of course, infrastructure. London is our most productive location and it is where our housing shortage is most acute, yet London recently slipped to the bottom of the regional house building tables. The Mayor of London was right to say that this was the most anti-London Budget in a generation. It did not offer a single extra penny in grants for affordable housing in London, and, according to the Office for Budget Responsibility, the Government’s headline measures on stamp duty are more likely to benefit current owners than first-time buyers. The Government must change their mindset from seeing housing as a commodity to seeing it as a pivotal means of increasing our nation’s productive potential.

More housing will kick-start productivity only if the right type of infrastructure supports it. Croydon Council recently gave the green light to a transformative project led by Westfield and Hammerson to bring thousands of new jobs and homes to Croydon, but we are hampered by our infrastructure. East Croydon station has the second highest number of rail interchanges in the country. The Brighton mainline, which serves Croydon and other important south London destinations, desperately needs
£1 billion to handle the increase in demand that it will face in the coming years. Overcrowding on the network is hampering our productivity.

To sum up, the challenges we face, from artificial intelligence to an ageing population, from climate change to Brexit, are serious, but unless we get the foundations in place to improve our productivity, we will not stand a chance.

8.52 pm

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): In leaving the European Union, we are re-joining the rest of the world. Our trade with the EU is in deficit and declining, and our trade with the rest of the world is in surplus and rising. The golden opportunity presented to us by Brexit is for Britain to lead the world as a global free-trading nation, championing trade liberalisation and taking on the voices of protectionism.

My constituency is dominated by the truly global oil and gas industry, which is, to quote Oil & Gas UK’s “Blueprint for Government”: "A global energy industry, anchored in the UK, powering the nation and exporting to the world". That is seen in current industry exports, which are expected to account for 43% of the UK supply chain turnover in 2017, up from 41% in 2016. To secure the industry’s global competitiveness and ensure that it captures a large share of an ever growing energy market, it is crucial that the right fiscal and regulatory regime is put in place to incentivise investment. To date, this Conservative Government have created one of the most competitive fiscal regimes anywhere in the world, by providing an unprecedented level of support for the North sea sector, with tax breaks worth £2.3 billion, the creation of the Oil and Gas Authority, and investment in the Aberdeen city region deal.

We all recognise that the job was not quite done yet, and our top ask, as a group of new Scottish Conservative MPs, was for the Chancellor to introduce transferrable tax history. I am delighted that Scottish Conservatives, engaging positively and constructively with our colleagues, have exerted influence at the heart of Government to deliver for Scotland. This policy change in the Budget can help to unlock upwards of £40 billion of new investment by allowing the transfer of tax history from the seller to the buyer when North sea assets are sold on. TTH can bring new inward investment by enabling more deals to be done on late-life assets. It can prolong the life of mature fields by many years. This highly competitive fiscal regime will ensure that the UK is a global leader in mature basin management and support the industry in meeting its vision for 2030 and its aim of doubling the supply chain’s share of the global market from 3.7% to 7.4% by 2035. This industry is one of the true global industrial success stories of the UK, and with its truly global reputation, it is a shining example of the global role that Britain can play outside the EU.

There is more to Aberdeen and the north-east than oil and gas. The region is also home to a thriving food and drink industry, and it is known for its whisky exports. That is why I am delighted that, in this Budget, Scottish Conservative MPs have delivered for the industry a further freeze on the duty on spirits, making a bottle of whisky £1.15 cheaper than it would otherwise have been since the duty rise ended in 2014. With the opportunity to forge our own new bilateral trade deals and agreements, we can take Scottish whisky to growing markets of the world such as India, and with the support of this Government, whisky will thrive with Brexit. As we have heard, there are huge opportunities for the United Kingdom. We have a new and historic opportunity to design a new trade policy and sign new deals. Let us seize that opportunity, and let us make the most of it.

8.56 pm

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): The Prime Minister spoke in Florence of a “new era of co-operation and partnership” for the UK’s international affairs. Since then we have seen Brexit negotiations falter, tension between the Foreign Office and the Department for International Development over aid spending, and now a Budget that lacks a clear vision for Britain. From an insufficient amount of new money for the former SSI site in Redcar, to just £335 million to deal with this winter’s crisis in the NHS and social care, this Budget was an opportunity missed.

The theme of today’s debate is global Britain, but the Budget had little to say on international development. We have a proud tradition of taking a lead on international development, with successive Governments committing to spend 0.7% of gross national income on overseas aid. This reputation should not be besmirched by murky deals with other nations’ militaries. We should be investing in the poorest communities, lifting people out of poverty and building local capacity to reduce long-term dependency on aid. We should be investing in conflict resolution and in growing the economies of the poorest countries of the world.

The Budget also had nothing to say about how we will finance our future relationship with the world. We will need to replace our current diplomatic relationships with nations in the EU as we withdraw, by investing considerably in a new European diplomatic corps. Extra investment will also be needed to expand our relationships outside Europe to take advantage of any opportunities that leaving the EU might bring, but this cannot be at the expense of international development. It needs to be in addition to our commitment to the world’s poorest. Global Britain will not command respect through our actions on the world stage alone; that will also depend on how our actions at home are perceived by our neighbours.

People who voted to leave the EU wanted to see healthcare improve. They expected more money to support the NHS frontline, but our staff feel demoralised and undervalued, applications from EU doctors and nurses have collapsed as uncertainty continues about their employment rights, and our waiting times for children’s mental health services are a national embarrassment. The £335 million for this winter is too little, too late to help the NHS to cope with the pressures it has now, and it is certainly a far cry from the figure plastered on the side of the Brexit bus. Yes, £2.8 billion over the next three years is welcome, but for the sustainability and transformation partnerships to be a reality, they need more resources. NHS leaders say that these amounts are not enough to sustain, let alone transform, healthcare.

The Budget also contained no new funds for social care—another missed opportunity. With our local authorities under pressure and most NHS trusts saying...
that their problems are made worse by the crisis in social care, we cannot afford to wait until next summer for a social care Green Paper. An offer has been made by MPs from across the House to collaborate on looking at the future of health and social care funding, and I encourage Ministers to work with all parties to deliver a sustainable solution to the care crisis. I urge Ministers, instead of focusing on Brexit battles around the Cabinet table, to focus on delivering for the British public, and to work with us to deliver the change we need to meet the challenges Britain faces.

8.59 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): On Friday, I was in my constituency office reflecting on a Budget that is building a Britain fit for the future. Westhill is the global centre for subsea excellence, and my office is surrounded on all sides by the headquarters and offices of American, French, Abu Dhabi and Norwegian oil and subsea engineering companies. Few other places in the country symbolise not only the global international nature of the oil and gas industry, but the welcoming and attractive nature of our country as a place to invest, do business and thrive. We can all be incredibly proud of our global reputation. Whether projecting soft power, hosting embassies and leading industrialists on board one of our frigates or destroyers, working alongside our allies in the Gulf, combating piracy off east Africa or delivering humanitarian aid, I have seen with my own eyes the incredible force for good that is our Royal Navy and its sailors and marines.

We are also the cultural capital of the world. The total value of services exported by the UK’s creative industries in 2014 was £19.8 billion—an increase of 10.9% since 2013. A prime example of our cultural strength and our soft power reach is the Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo. It could be described as the perfect hybrid of British hard and soft power, bringing together servicemen and cultural ambassadors from around the world, acting as an export catalyst and exporting the British military and its and our values on the world stage. The tattoo sells tickets in 102 countries, with 30% of its audience coming from aboard. Having already taken the show to Australia and New Zealand, the aim now is to set its sights on China in 2020, which I hope the whole House can support. I am very lucky to be married to a girl from Sweden. That means that I have the whole House can support. I am very lucky to be married to a girl from Sweden. That means that I have of course endured my fair share of Scandi-noir over the years, and I can tell the House with authority that our country does tell pretty gripping…

Britain has always taken its international obligations seriously, and we will continue to do so. Britain has fought for freedom from tyranny, for liberty and democracy, for human rights and for freedom of the press around the world. We are the first to respond to the call for aid and the first to deploy our brilliant troops and aid workers in some of the world’s most dangerous and challenging locations.

We lead the word in our educational and cultural offerings and remain one of the most attractive countries in which to invest. As we stand today on the brink of a new dawn, I am proud of what this country has done in the past, proud of what we are doing today and, with this Budget, excited for what we will achieve in the future. That is why I commend the Budget to the House.

9.2 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I suppose that nobody in the Chamber should be surprised that the Foreign Secretary was more comfortable talking about penguins than he was about the £350 million a week for the NHS—I guess the penguins probably reminded him of the Bullingdon Club days. Opposition Members need to remember that the Foreign Secretary is very sensitive about being reminded of his pledge, so I encourage everyone to use that at every opportunity. I wanted the Foreign Secretary to identify where in the Budget the £350 million a week was going to come from and when it was going to be available, because I was going to put in a bid for £400 million, which the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh)—a neighbouring constituency—will recognise as the figure required for St Helier Hospital’s improvements. However, the Foreign Secretary was of course unable to offer the £350 million that he had painted on the side of the bus.

This Budget brings the day of reckoning for the Brexiter on the Government Benches—and for some on the Opposition Benches who do not appear to be here today—a day closer. It says that Brexit, with fewer skilled workers and less investment, will hammer our productivity and damage our economic prospects, and that has already started in the automotive industry.

Many Members have quoted the Institute for Fiscal Studies, which says:

“The forecasts for productivity, earnings and economic growth make pretty grim reading… GDP per capita will be 3.5% smaller in 2021 than forecast less than two years ago… a loss of £65 billion to the economy.”

I find it bizarre that Conservative Members ask us to be cheerleaders for the Government, given the figures the IFS is reporting on the Budget’s impact on the economy. The Chancellor promised a surplus of £350 million in 2019-20, and now he is promising that the deficit will be reduced to just £35 billion at that point.

There we have it: forecasts for productivity and growth are down; the number of apprenticeships is dramatically down; the forecasts for debt and inflation are up; and the date for clearing the deficit has been pushed back yet again. Neither the Government nor, I am afraid to say, the official Opposition have the answer to the economic calamity we are facing.

The Government’s answer is to drive the car fast towards the Brexit cliff, to invoke the will of the people and to keep their fingers crossed on the way down. The official
Opposition’s position seems to be to drive the car fast towards the Brexit cliff and when it leaves terra firma, like Dick Dastardly and Muttley in “Wacky Races,” to remain poised in mid-air for two years before invoking the will of the people and keeping their fingers crossed on the way down. That is clearly Labour’s position, because the shadow Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), was not able to answer the question on what her position is.

The Budget provides no answers to the critical economic challenges that the UK faces, yet the answer is relatively simple: invest in infrastructure and housing; scrap the apprenticeship levy; and stay in the single market, the customs union and the European Union. That is why the Liberal Democrats are pressing for a vote on the deal and an exit from Brexit.

9.6 pm

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow so many hon. Members. They have spoken on a range of topics, one or two of which I will pick out.

Contrary to what we keep hearing from the Opposition, the economic picture is very rosy. We have a growing economy and record inward investment. The deficit has come down by three quarters since 2010, and debt will be falling as of next year. There has been an extraordinary economic turnaround, given the situation the country was left in by the last Labour Government.

We have the fifth biggest economy in the world, we are the fifth largest exporter in Europe and we are the top destination for inward investment in Europe. This is a Budget that seeks to strengthen Britain’s position in the world, to confront the challenges we face with confidence, and to embrace the technological future. Britain has a unique place, positioned as it is in Europe, but with close links to the United States, the Commonwealth and developing markets throughout the world. There are a number of reasons for that, including our outlook and our industriousness. We also have enormous soft power. Our education system educates the brightest and best, and it exports our values throughout the world.

Tourism and culture are important to west Oxfordshire. My hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) mentioned that £19.8 billion of investment comes into the UK. With a value of £300 million, and 4 million visits a year, tourism and culture is probably the most important thing to west Oxfordshire’s economy. Nationally, we have the BBC and a great number of other extraordinarily important cultural icons. Much of “Downton Abbey” is filmed in my constituency, and we also have Blenheim Palace, which has been a film set for everything from Harry Potter to James Bond. As we have heard, the industrial strategy builds on that through the creative industries policy and evidence centre, which will promote the inward tourism that is so important to west Oxfordshire and the country.

Exporting businesses are also important. There is incredible innovation in my constituency and throughout the United Kingdom in aerospace, information technology and manufacturing. The Federation of Small Businesses has called this Budget business-friendly—and quite rightly, too. This is a Budget that has an action plan to unlock £20 billion of patient capital investment to finance growth in just the sort of innovative firms that we have in west Oxfordshire. There will be a £2.5 billion investment fund through the British Business Bank, with private sector involvement taking the total to £7.5 billion.

Research and development is crucial, and it is getting the biggest boost for 40 years, with £2.3 billion extra investment from the national productivity investment fund, which itself has been expanded by £8 billion. This takes total direct R&D spending to £12.5 billion by 2021-22. We have heard about the investment in artificial intelligence and driverless cars. They are just the start of the emerging technologies throughout the country in which we will be able to invest, and this is of enormous importance. There must be investment in skills, too, so I am delighted to see that there is £177 million for maths teachers and computing.

In the last 30 seconds available to me, I will speak briefly about Oxfordshire. I am pleased that in addition to the investment in the companies I have spoken of, we have investment in the Cambridgeshire, Milton Keynes and Oxford expressway, an important road and rail link uniting the two great centres of learning and business with that great thriving city in the middle. This will be extremely important, and there is a Government package for investment and infrastructure of £30 million for each of the five years. This Budget ensures that this is a Britain that can face the future with confidence and thrive.

9.10 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): The most striking features of the Budget are the parts the Chancellor tried to ignore: growth and wages. After all we have been through, and after all the promises about long-term economic plans, austerity and building for the future, the reality is that average earnings will be no higher in 2022 than they were in 2007. We are heading for the worst decade for pay growth for 210 years. Given all the lectures from Conservative Members, it is worth pointing out that the Chancellor is now on target to borrow £30 billion more by 2020 than was predicted just a year ago. Apparently, it is okay to be in that position but still to lecture others about the dangers of borrowing to invest.

The greatest disappointment is that the Chancellor does not seem to recognise the impact of rising food prices, although 78% of my constituents who replied to my cost of living survey were worried about the failure of wages to keep pace with inflation, with 80% stressing the impact on family budgets of rising food prices. The Government also look very out of touch when it comes to funding the fight against crime, tackling social care—that was one area in which we might have expected progress after the fiasco of their manifesto—and recognising the plight of schools.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Steve McCabe: I will not, because we have only a short time left and other Members want to speak.

It is disappointing that the partial response to the problems with universal credit is being delayed. That issue was raised by 94% of people who responded to my survey. They will not understand why the Government are only cutting the waiting time to five weeks, or why we need to wait another three months for action, especially with all the pressures over Christmas. They certainly will not
understand the continuing freeze on benefits. One way in which savings could be made would be to address the cost of work capability interviews for people who have long-established and well-documented illnesses that clearly leave them unable to work. Even those responsible for the assessments concede that this is a punitive and pointless exercise, with decisions often reversed at appeal after months of worry and suffering.

It is not all bad. I am hopeful about the industrial strategy and, on the back of today’s news about life sciences, I hope that Ministers will shortly come to Birmingham to announce support for Birmingham Health Partners and the Institute of Translational Medicine so that the extraordinary medical advances that are being pioneered there also become a focus for new jobs and industries. I also want more effort to boost our region’s skills base, which is crucial for the growth that our economy needs. I ask the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills to look at how we can ensure that those making large contributions to the apprenticeship levy, such as Cadbury in my constituency, get a fair return, and at how we use the levy more imaginatively to involve the self-employed and those in microbusinesses who, if freed from bureaucracy and costs, would be in a position to offer young people high-quality apprenticeships that will lead to real jobs in emerging areas.

9.14 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): The hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) might have Downside Abbey in his constituency, but at the heart of mine, Mitcham and Morden, is one of the biggest working industrial estates in south London. It is home to dozens of businesses—from scaffolders to skip yards, and from builders to brick yards. Among the lorries, vans, skips and fumes is a converted warehouse housing 84 families and hundreds of children. Four local authorities—Sutton, Croydon, Bromley and Merton—have been housing residents in Connect House because the Government have left them unable to borrow and unable to build so that those families can have a true place to call home. The residents of Connect House are just 84 of the 78,180 families in temporary accommodation throughout the country for whom a new Budget offered some hope of a way out and a place to call home.

The impact of temporary accommodation on the education and wellbeing of the 120,170 children without a permanent home has never been calculated, but I fear that it will continue to be felt in the decades to come. On the morning of the Budget, I received a letter from Mrs Sheridan, the headteacher at Malmesbury Primary School in my constituency, regarding a pupil who lives in Connect House. Since he has moved there, the pupil has been classified as a “persistent absentee,” meaning that his attendance is at such a low level that it will, should it not improve quickly, have a significant impact on his attainment.

Like Mrs Sheridan, I listened attentively to the Budget statement to hear what hope it would offer to her pupil and his friends and neighbours who just want a place to call home. The answer in the Budget was as follows: “Local authorities will be invited to bid for increases in their caps from 2019-20, up to a total of £1 billion by the end of 2021-22.” The Government estimate that up to 300,000 new homes will be needed each year to combat the backlog and prevent rising unaffordability, so it is crucial to establish how many homes that £1 billion could build. The answer is just 15,000.

The last time 300,000 homes were built in one year in England was almost half a century ago, in 1969, back when councils and housing associations were building new homes. Since 1939, in fact, the delivery of more than 200,000 homes per year in England has happened only when there have been major public sector house building programmes. Let us consider what happened last year. Of the 147,930 permanent dwellings completed in 2016-17, 82% were in the private sector. Some 25,000, or 17%, were built by housing associations, while 1,840 were built by local authorities.

To meet the target for new homes we need two RTBs: not only the right to buy but the right to build—the right for local authorities to build at affordable prices. Affordable rents do not match the Government’s definition of 80% of market value, because that is not affordable to anyone. We can go on talking about this issue, but we are putting more salt into the wounds of those who do not have a home if we simply refuse to liberate the land and the money to make building possible.

9.18 pm

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): I wish to use the next few minutes to set out an alternative Budget—one that the UK, as a leader of global nations, should have delivered; a Budget that works not only for the haves, but for the just about managing.

This Budget was an opportunity for the Chancellor to speak to the homeless and the sick; to the looked-after child, the disabled man, the 80-year-old with dementia and the businessman and woman; to the teacher and the nurse; and to our police and firefighters. That is who the Chancellor should be speaking to. Unfortunately, he failed to deliver a Budget for our nation.

Since 2010, tax avoidance has cost the UK economy nearly £13 billion. Imagine what that £13 billion could do for those who need our support in this country. What could we pay for if we just had £1 billion of avoided tax paid back? Well, £1 billion could fund 125 miles of railway track electrification that the Chancellor and the Transport Secretary promised my constituency of Colne Valley and those who travel between Leeds and Manchester. Once again, the Chancellor has ignored what he previously promised and instead decided to plough more money into HS2, which is already off the tracks with its spending. The Chancellor’s offer on transport was more Thomas the Tank Engine than a quality trans-Pennine rail service.

One billion pounds would also help to build 50,000 shared ownership homes or 16,600 social housing units. We need a housing strategy to build affordable and social housing like we had in the 1940s and 1950s. We need a housing strategy that puts infrastructure in place at the same time so as not to overpower local communities.

I now wish to turn my attention to something that was totally missing from the Chancellor’s Budget—social care. Frankly, I am lost for words that he did not think it was worth his time to mention social care. Was it deliberate? After all, last time the Conservatives talked about social care, they lost their parliamentary majority, and the weak and wobbly coalition of chaos was formed.
We have an ageing population and we need to make sure that our mums and dads are cared for in their old age. My local council, Kirklees, currently spends £101.8 million per year on adult social care, which is 35% of its total budget. Kirklees has had its direct funding from the Government cut already by £129 million, and a further £65 million will be cut by 2021. In addition, it is predicted that the number of people in Kirklees over the age of 65 will increase by 29% in the next 13 years. How will the Chancellor’s Budget actually help Councillor Kendrick in Kirklees to continue to provide support for vulnerable older people in Colne Valley?

My alternative budget would do the following: fund electrification of the trans-Pennine Manchester to Leeds rail route, updating trains and making the trains work for the communities that they need to serve; fund social and affordable housing for the many and not just the few; fully fund social care; reopen Sure Start; and scrap the public pay cap.

Let me return to the start of my speech. Yes, the Chancellor had some nice soundbites in the Budget last Wednesday, but we need a Budget to help those who are just about surviving, that invests for the future and future generations, and that works for the many, not just the few.

9.22 pm

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): It is great to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker).

In the build-up to last week’s Budget, I was pleased to hear speculation that it could end the last seven years of crippling austerity, and that, following Labour’s successful general election campaign, the Government might finally listen to the suffering up and down the country. Members can therefore imagine my surprise when the Chancellor sat down at the end of his speech having failed even to mention the words “social care” let alone to propose a funding settlement to tackle the crisis. He also failed to mention policing or counter-terrorism, which are under more pressure than ever.

There is still no plan, direction or leadership from this Government to strengthen our local economies, such as that of my constituency of Leigh. Therefore, once again, the burden of this Budget will end up falling on our hard-working public services, which will be asked to take on even more responsibility without the means to do so.

To put this matter into context, my constituency’s local authority of Wigan will have had £160 million of cuts to its budget by 2020, which means that key public services, on which our most vulnerable rely, have been withdrawn. Let me inform the hon. Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey), who is no longer in his place, that coming up with alternatives is not just something for the Opposition. Local councils across the country have warned the Chancellor that they face a £5.8 billion funding gap over the next two years. That will mean that 60p in every pound that people pay in council tax could be spent solely on children and adult care services that councils provide. That leaves hardly anything for other vital services provided by local authorities, such as cleaning our streets, running leisure centres and keeping our public libraries open. But instead of funding our local authorities, the Chancellor only heaped on more responsibility without the ability to deliver.

This Government have long talked about the integration of health and social care, yet the Budget has done nothing to address the matter. The Government fail to recognise the huge impact of the underfunding of social care on our NHS, local authorities and communities. The same is happening in children’s services. The cuts to local authorities, Sure Start centres and early intervention and prevention grants, and the failing 30 hours’ free childcare policy are putting more vulnerable children at risk. The story of this Budget is therefore one of failure and neglect—failure to address the country’s long-term economic needs, to invest in our future and to fund our public services, which have been neglected by this Government for too long.

Britain deserved a bold, comprehensive and ambitious Budget that funded public services and protected local authorities. Instead, we got a threadbare Budget from a Government clinging to power, who choose to ignore the deep crisis we face in society. Those issues will not simply disappear. We must therefore confront them with the strength, resolve and determination that only a Labour Government can provide.

9.26 pm

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): It is an honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Jo Platt).

This Budget will forever stand as a reminder of why we should never trust the Conservative party with the economy. Its mismanagement of fiscal policy since 2010 has led us to the longest fall in living standards for 60 years, and that looks set to continue well into the next decade. The deficit will not be eliminated for at least another 16 years. Growth is below 2% in every forecast year for the first time in modern history, and annual pay will not return to its 2008 peak until 2025, all because of an austerity programme that has bought so much pain with no gain. This Budget gives us nothing but more of the same—more austerity, and more attacks on the poor and vulnerable. It also gives us the same tired solutions, with a few scraps here and there for the NHS, hints that nurses might get a pay rise and changes in stamp duty for first-time buyers that are more likely to drive up prices in an already inflated market. All these sticking plasters just go to show that the Government have no idea how hard it is out there for people who struggle to make ends meet on wages that have not increased for years while inflation and living costs continue to rise.

Public services and public service workers are on their knees, but their desperate cries for more pay have been largely ignored: NHS staff have been all but ignored; teachers and pupils—ignored; firefighters—ignored; the chief constable of Bedfordshire police, who said publicly that he no longer has enough police officers to protect the public, has been ignored; local authorities—ignored; social care recipients—ignored; and mental health sufferers—ignored. That’s a Conservative Government for you.

The east midlands rail franchise threatens a poorer service for Bedford rail users, who have been let down by the Government’s cancellation of their plans to electrify the line from London to Sheffield, leading to slower and less environmentally-friendly trains. And talking
of broken promises, it is now time for this Government to tell the nation the truth. Brexit is hurting our economy. That is not just because of the fall of the pound or because the UK are now the worst-performing advanced economy in the world, but because this is costing us a huge sum of money before we even leave—£3 billion, just to prepare for Britain’s exit on top of the £700 million that was already put aside. Hidden in the Red Book was an extra £3.5 billion every year to the EU after Brexit, even after transition. Just imagine how that could transform our NHS.

This is no Budget for the future, this is not prosperity and this is not progress—and it certainly does not reveal a nation ready to take on the challenges of the uncertain future Brexit brings.

9.30 pm

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): I would like to take this opportunity to raise transport and housing budget-related issues. I was extremely disappointed that the Chancellor has chosen to make little headway in addressing the north-south divide that continues to prevail in our country. The fact remains that we have greater gaps between our regions than any other OECD country, and this Government are simply not doing enough to address that.

Infrastructure is key to the development of the northern powerhouse the Government hope to build. They have introduced yet another toll in the north-west. It will cost my constituents and other residents in the region in excess of £1,000 a year to cross the new Mersey Gateway toll bridge. Many of their journeys will be made simply to travel to work or to attend hospital appointments. I urge the Government to reassess that situation and to use the next Budget to find the funds to scrap these tolls and to alleviate that burden on my constituents and on businesses. It is about time the Government began to invest properly in northern infrastructure.

Let me move on to housing, the green belt and air quality. In constituencies across the UK, including mine, there is a huge shortage of affordable homes. Under Conservative-led Governments, we have seen homelessness double, ownership fall to a 30-year low, the lowest number of social rented homes built since records began, and the number of new affordable homes fall by half since 2010. There was no new direct central Government investment in affordable housing in the Budget. Many of the houses that have been built are simply not affordable, leaving families, first-time buyers and many others unable to step on to the property ladder.

I welcome the Chancellor’s commitment to continue the strong protection of our green belt, but this Budget remains a missed opportunity to strengthen the protections and to enshrine a brownfield-first approach to development. The Government have so often been strong on words but weak on action, so it is no surprise that, despite strong protections, evidence collected by the Campaign to Protect Rural England shows that there has been a 54% increase in the number of homes being built or that have been planned to be built in the green belt in the past year—the biggest year-on-year increase in two decades. There is increasing evidence that local authorities are turning to development in the green belt as a result of mounting pressure from the Government to meet housing targets and to produce local plans. These councils are responding to a series of national messages and policies that are forcing many of them to release green-belt land to receive financial incentives and avoid sanctions.

The Government must do more to address the housing crisis, to protect our green belt and to improve air quality.

9.33 pm

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): I am not sure what briefings Government Members are reading, but all the ones I have read have made it clear that the message from this Budget is dire. Economic growth—downgraded. Productivity—down. And the potential of a pay rise apparently on ice for anything up to 17 years. That is all in the face of an ever-increasing burden of Government debt, fuelled by the persistence of a failed austerity-first economic policy.

Britain has gone from being one of the fastest-growing economies to one of the slowest. It is blindingly obvious that the main reason is Brexit. Yet I come to this place every week to be told that it will all be fine. It clearly is not fine. The Budget shows that this remarkable period of Brexit self-harm is causing pain to our country and to my constituents, not just now but for generations to come.

Britain maintained its post-imperial standing in the world due to its thriving economy, its ability to build consensus in the European Union while influencing policy in the United States, and the strength of our military. Yet today we are in the relegation zone of the league of major global economies. We are pulling out of the European Union while the President of the United States pulls away from everyone else. We have brewing rebellions over a lack of investment in our armed forces. We are telling the world that Britain is closed. We have decided to hide from the challenges and the opportunities of globalisation. We are hoping that if we keep our heads under the union flag-branded pillow, with “Rule, Britannia” on loud enough in the background, everything will be okay.

In Bristol North West, we have one of Europe’s largest hospitals; workers and supply chain businesses for advanced manufacturing at Airbus, GKN, Rolls-Royce, Boeing and the Ministry of Defence; world-leading researchers and academics at Bristol University and the University of the West of England; one of the largest digital economies in the UK outside of London; a port managing imports and exports across the world, including tens of thousands of motor vehicles each year; and 40,000 homes, 35% of which are owned with a mortgage and 35% rented. In the face of a hard Brexit, the economic reality for my constituents is a disaster. We will see delays at Bristol port causing gridlock on our roads, with re-directed car imports and exports due to leaving the customs union; waiting times rocketing due to departing EU doctors and nurses; clinical scans and cancer treatments potentially postponed due to impending deadlines on importing medical isottes from the continent; the loss of investment and jobs due to the possibility of advanced manufacturing leaving the UK; and families left with little money each month due to increases in rent and mortgage payments following Bank of England increases in the base rate to try to control Brexit-induced inflation—all this, alongside no additional core funding for our schools, our police or our social care at a time when Brexit is costing billions and billions.
There are some really great people in voluntary organisations, in the local authority and in the police trying their very best to tackle the issues, but their hands are tied behind their backs by the lack of resources. We are seeing the cumulative impact of cuts over the past seven years, and not just in statutory services. There is a vital relationship between the voluntary and statutory sectors, which work together to make a difference to address it in the local government and police settlements.

There is a vital relationship between the voluntary and statutory sectors, which work together to make a difference. Police community support officers are down 18%, and we have lost almost one in five officers. Police civilian staff are down 24%, and their roles are key, too. Police community support officers are down 27%, in roles that have been vital to building the relationships that cut crime.

The Chancellor needs to reflect seriously on the perfect storm that the Government’s policies are creating in our communities up and down the country, and he needs to address it in the local government and police settlements. It is not just the sustainability of our councils and our police forces that is at stake, but the sustainability of our communities.

9.40 pm

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): The global theme of today’s Budget debate has enabled the House to examine the impact of the Chancellor’s statement on Britain’s place in our world and our readiness to respond to the global challenges we face. Many of those challenges have been referred to by hon. Members. The whole House was shocked by the attack on the al-Rawda mosque, in which 305 worshippers, including 27 children, were slaughtered. The threat of terrorism is global, and although this particular atrocity was perhaps symptomatic of the metastasis of the cancer that is Daesh and a result of its military defeat in Raqqa, we must understand the implications for the strength of our military.

Many hon. Members on both sides of the House, including my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) and the Chairs of the Foreign Affairs and Defence Committees, have warned that cutting our armed forces by a further 12,000 will seriously undermine our global capacity. Recently, Government Back Benchers have reportedly engaged with their Treasury colleagues on this subject in the fashion of an English wicketkeeper greeting an Aussie batsman. The depletion of our armed forces capacity in an uncertain world is something that the Government contemplate at their peril.

Another challenge, which was raised powerfully by my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan), is the appalling suffering of the Rohingya people who have fled from Myanmar’s Rakhine province. Their plight moved the new Secretary of State for International Development to tears on her visit over the weekend to Bangladesh, and she is reported to have said that it appears to be ethnic cleansing. I think that most hon. Members in this House would simply say, “Yes, it is.” But I pay respect to her for going so quickly to apprise herself of the situation there and in the Caribbean. I trust that she will be a strong advocate for her Department’s financial needs against the siren voices in the Conservative party who wish Britain to downgrade its 0.7% commitment or to circumscribe our aid budget in such a way as to refocus it away from poverty reduction, disaster relief or sustainable development. My hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) was shouted down by Government Members when she pointed out that, as page 22 of the Red Book sets out, ODA budgets will be adjusted to reflect the OBR’s revised GNI forecast. They will, therefore, be cut by £375 million in 2018-19 and £520 million in 2019-20—a reduction of almost £1 billion.

There have been 17 named storms in the Atlantic hurricane season this year, many of them at category 5. That has made the season the costliest on record, with an estimated $367.5 billion of damage. Harvey, Irma and Maria have not just cost dollars; they have devastated the lives of our friends and Commonwealth partners throughout the Caribbean and beyond. UK assistance has been vital to many of those countries, and we welcome the £5 million that was made available to
Dominica, as well as the additional funding announced from DFID when the Prince of Wales visited Antigua and Barbuda last week. But perhaps the Foreign Secretary should reflect on the 10% cut in the financial support for our overseas territories and consider reversing it.

Disaster relief is not the answer to climate change, which is one of the central challenges facing the international community. With the UN climate conference having just finished in Bonn, the opportunity provided by the Budget should have been used to make key policy announcements on policies that would mitigate climate change. Instead, we find that there will be no new low-carbon electricity levies until 2025, and there is nothing for renewables or investment in domestic energy efficiency, or for the necessary transformation of our grid structures to bring on new localised production, microgeneration and supply. Instead, there is a clean growth plan—six years late—that will not even meet the microgeneration and supply. Instead, there is a clean growth plan—six years late—that will not even meet the target set in the fourth carbon budget, never mind the fifth carbon budget.

No international debate should or could have taken place without reference to the appalling war going on in Yemen. Yesterday’s Financial Times leader on the looming famine in Yemen is one of the finest editorials I have read. It refers to the risk that allies of Saudi Arabia face in being complicit in the use of starvation as a weapon of war. It is chilling. It says that the conflict has 

descended into a new circle of hell after Saudi Arabia committed its air force to defeating Houthi rebels” earlier this year, and began destroying bridges, roads, markets and container ports. The infrastructure breakdown means that food is reaching the hungry “fatally slowly”, and that was before the Saudis decided to block even humanitarian aid in reprisal for a missile fired at Riyadh earlier this month. Seven million people are now on the brink of famine, according to the UN.

The relation of this tragedy to the Budget becomes clear when we look at the OBR projections for trade growth. Globally, world trade is set to grow year on year by approximately 4%, but the Government’s own projection of the contribution trade will make to our own domestic growth declines to zero by 2019, and stays at zero for four years throughout the life of this Parliament. It is no wonder that the Government have been reluctant to jeopardise the £4 billion deal to sell Saudi Arabia British fighter jets. Human rights must not be regarded as a commercial inconvenience. If our country wishes to stand tall in the global community, our human rights must not be compromised.

The central facts of the Budget determine how our country is able to respond to all these international challenges. I agree with the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) not only exposed the anti-London nature of this Budget, but highlighted the total lack of any stimulus to housing supply, as indeed did my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid). My hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central highlighted the fact that the need for the productivity growth on which depend our country’s future prosperity and successful engagement on the international stage. Productivity will depend on the two pillars of education and infrastructure investment, so it is not coincidence that these were the two key offers that the Labour party made in our manifesto at the general election, with our national transformation fund and our national education service.

It would be tempting to claim that this Budget proves that the Government have lost their way. The truth is that they never had a direction in the first place. The Prime Minister is a prisoner of her Cabinet, and her Cabinet is divided against itself. Sooner or later, the electorate will put them out of their misery and we will have a Budget for the many, not the few.

9.50 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Stephen Barclay): I thank my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary for opening the debate. He spoke with customary élan about how the Budget will ensure that Britain capitalises on the industries of the future—robotics, artificial intelligence and self-driving cars. He was right to highlight that a new tech business is created every hour in Britain, powered by a workforce who have seen 3 million more jobs created since 2010 and unemployment at its lowest level for 42 years. He set out our ambition to be global and outward looking, to protect maritime and environmental standards, and to use our defence, overseas aid and intelligence capacity to project influence around the world.

The debate has benefited from a wide range of contributions. The Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling...
[Stephen Barclay]

(Tom Tugendhat), spoke about the effectiveness of soft power and described the Foreign Office and DFID working to project that power in order to promote international rules.

The hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) gave the powerful case study of Mary’s Meals, which shows not just Scotland’s reach around the world, but that of the United Kingdom. I think that his pride in the good work done by that charity was shared on both sides of the House.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) highlighted how much the Opposition would increase debt. He mentioned the specific measures in the Budget to help business, such as the staircase tax, as well as the importance of building homes, which is a key measure in the Budget, including the abolition of stamp duty for the vast majority of first-time buyers.

The hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) spoke about her recent experiences in Myanmar in a way that I think touched all Members of the House. She spoke of the tragedy she saw unfolding there and explained the important treatment she has been able to offer those fleeing persecution.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcesterhire (Nigel Huddleston) correctly highlighted that 4 million people have been taken out of tax entirely by this Government through the increase in the personal allowance.

The hon. Member for Blyth Valley (Mr Campbell), who is no longer in his place, spoke in a way that I think many Government Members welcomed, highlighting the importance of honouring the vote to leave the European Union, as his constituents voted to do. He also talked about the importance of housing, which is at the centre of the Budget.

My right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) spoke about the importance of soft power, as well as hard power, and the value of the Commonwealth.

The hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) said that his Budget speech was the seventh he had made, and I fear that it was no more positive than the previous six. That characterises the difference between the optimism on the Government Benches and the pessimism on the Opposition side.

My hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) highlighted the importance of High Speed 2 and connectivity to Leeds. He also recognised the contribution of the hon. Member for Tooting.

The hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) accepted the £44 billion commitment on housing but failed to recognise the £1.3 billion put into school funding earlier this year.

My hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Sir Robert Syms) reminded the House—should we need reminding—that the previous Labour Government left a note stating, “There is no money left,” because Labour always goes too far. His optimism reflects the optimism of this Government.

The right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson) highlighted how his constituents make things and called for a transition, so I am sure that he valued the commitment that the Prime Minister gave in her Florence speech.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) highlighted that debt interest remains a bigger expense than the defence and policing budgets combined and how, under the previous Labour Government, £300,000 was added to our debt Bill every minute.

The hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) mentioned the TUC but omitted any mention of the extra funding for Unionlearn, which I am sure he welcomes.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) highlighted the 19 consecutive quarters of growth and the increase in employment, and my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez) recognised the value of strategic investments in infrastructure unlocking much needed housing.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Colin Clark) flagged up how it was a good budget for Scotland, reflecting on the convincing representation of Scottish colleagues—we have certainly come to see that in the Treasury. My hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak) highlighted how debt as a percentage of GDP is set to fall, as the Government stick to their fiscal target.

The hon. Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) spoke of the tragedy of Grenfell, but did not mention the £28 million in the Budget for additional community support to victims—set out on page 63 of the Red Book, if she missed it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) highlighted the funding for electric vehicles and the scope of the UK to be a leader in that new technology. My hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) highlighted the absence of any credible alternative Budget from the Opposition.

The hon. Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) valued the stimulus of investment in infrastructure and gave credit to the Government for the £1.5 billion upgrade of the A14, but seemed to omit the Government’s commitment to upgrading Ely junction. My hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Alec Gallacher) pointed out the increase in the living wage and the Government’s lowering of corporation tax, and how that is boosting business.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) spoke about the importance of migration. The Government recognise the benefits of migration; we just want to control it, rather than leave it uncontrolled.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) highlighted the importance of investing in skills and the value of open markets for quality design, technology and ceramics. The hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) spoke of the importance of productivity. My hon. Friend the Member for Middlesborough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) flagged the exciting regeneration projects in his constituency and his optimism in the Budget.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) highlighted the difference that Scottish Conservative MPs are making in the Government. My hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson) highlighted the benefits to the oil and gas industry from measures in the Budget. My hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine
Andrew Bowie spoke about the force for good provided by the Royal Navy and the value of cultural exports in projecting soft power.

The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) spoke of a day of reckoning. Most of us on the Conservative Benches thought that was the 2015 general election, when the Liberal Democrats did get that day of reckoning.

My hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) talked about the impact of patient capital and how that will be a stimulus for growth. The hon. Member for Leigh (Jo Platt) appeared to think her party had won the general election. I am sorry to break the news to her, which I am sure will come as a shock.

This Budget builds on the heavy lifting the Government have done to bring down the deficit by three-quarters since 2010 through delivering 19 consecutive quarters of growth. It ensures we remain on track to meet our fiscal targets, while continuing to invest in our core public services. It expands the national productivity investment fund by a further £8 billion, meaning that in real terms the Government will spend £25 billion a year more on infrastructure than the average spending under the last Labour Government.

This is a balanced Budget, in contrast to a Labour Opposition who always go too far. They would borrow £500 billion and burden the country with huge debt interest payments. This is a Budget that ensures Britain is fit for the future.

Ordered, That the debate be now adjourned.—(Mike Freer.)

10 pm

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I suspect that I will not be alone in the House in having concerns about how NHS continuing care is operating these days. Concerns about the process will have been raised by the constituencies of many hon. Members on both sides of the House. It is worth recognising that the process of NHS continuing care has always been fraught because a lot of money often turns on the outcome, and the families affected are often going through a very difficult time as they cope with a loved one with serious care needs. However, particular things are happening in the system now that seem to justify our spending some time on considering whether the current situation is acceptable.

As the NHS and the care system struggle with what I think are impossible finances, some wholly unacceptable practices are emerging around the country, some of which I want to deal with this evening. First, it is clear that a postcode lottery is emerging, with no democratic legitimacy at all. The massive variation in the acceptance rate for applications for NHS continuing care has always been fraught because a lot of money often turns on the outcome, and the families affected are often going through a very difficult time as they cope with a loved one with serious care needs. However, particular things are happening in the system now that seem to justify our spending some time on considering whether the current situation is acceptable.

Ordered, That the debate be now adjourned.—(Mike Freer.)

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Ordered, That the debate be now adjourned.—(Mike Freer.)

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): In my experience, this depends not just on the postcode, but on how the referral is made. If a referral is made through a hospice, the process is clear and transparent, but with other mechanisms, it is more smoke and mirrors.

Norman Lamb: The hon. Lady might well be right. That does not justify the variations, but it is a possible explanation for part of the problem.

Secondly, the number of people nationally who are found to be eligible is falling. The National Audit Office found that the proportion of people assessed as eligible for standard continuing healthcare by CCGs reduced from 34% in 2011-12 to 29% in 2015-16.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that home care packages must be better funded so that people can live independently at home, while still being cleaned and cared for, but that that is extremely difficult due to the finance available?
Norman Lamb: I will come on to that point in a moment. We are seeing more and more cases of couples being forcibly separated, which is really shocking and a denial of their human rights, so I agree with the hon. Gentleman.

At the end of March 2017, 57,000 patients were eligible for continuing healthcare in England, which was down 1.6% on the previous quarter and 2.7% on the previous year. What possible explanation for that can there be? Demand is rising significantly every year across the country, yet the number of people entitled is going down. That must be due to decision makers imposing tougher eligibility criteria.

Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): Is the right hon. Gentleman aware of the trend in my constituency of people who are already in receipt of continuing care being reviewed and deemed no longer eligible? As a result, the cost of their care is pushed on to local government, instead of continuing to be met from within the health service?

Norman Lamb: I am aware of that. Often there is no change in such people’s condition, but sometimes their condition deteriorates. Sometimes the cost is pushed on to the local authority, but sometimes it is pushed on to the family, which is another very serious concern.

There are also a great many complaints about the process that is used. There are complaints about evidence being ignored, which can result in a judgment that someone is ineligible for NHS continuing care, and about professionals lacking an understanding of the condition that they are supposed to be considering. A survey conducted by the Continuing Healthcare Alliance found that 66% of people felt that professionals knew little about the condition that was under consideration. More seriously, there were allegations that medical opinions were being ignored. The BBC heard from three health workers who revealed, effectively as whistleblowers, that medical opinions were actively ignored as part of the process.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It took one of my constituents several months and many phone calls even to receive an assessment for her relative. When she finally managed to receive it, the nurse on the day said that it was unlikely that continuing healthcare would be provided. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is shocking, and that staff should be given training before undertaking such assessments?

Norman Lamb: I do agree. The problem is compounded by the long delays that people have to face, often at very stressful times when they are wondering whether they will have to sell a home to pay for care and have no idea what the outcome of the process will be.

There are a number of cases around the country in which the costs of packages have been capped, with top-ups required from relatives. A growing number of clinical commissioning groups are applying a cap to what they will pay for home support packages above the cheapest care home alternative. That is really insidious. At the extremes, it is reasonable to recognise the pressures on public finances but, as the BBC reported on “You and Yours”, 19 CCGs refused to pay for home care packages if the costs were 10% higher than the costs of a care home. There are many cases in which couples who may have been married for decades are suddenly forcibly separated. What are we doing? That is inhuman, and, as I have said, it breaches a human right—the right to a family life.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on securing this debate on a very important subject. I have encountered cases in my constituency in which people have been delayed from leaving hospital because an argument is raging between the local authority and the CCG about who is ultimately responsible for payment, partly because the CCG is encouraging people to opt for cheaper care home provision even if that is not what they want. Has the right hon. Gentleman come across similar cases in the course of his research?

Norman Lamb: Depressingly, I have. Earlier this evening, when I was giving the Speaker’s lecture, I made the case that we need, ultimately, a pooled budget for both health and care to stop these awful arguments between the health and social care silos.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): In my experience, trying to define which is the social care part of an individual’s need and which is the medical part can be very challenging, as many people will have a combination of both. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the Government’s proposal for accountable care systems in which one group is responsible for meeting both needs is a great step forward?

Norman Lamb: If it were happening, I would. I totally agree that we need to bring health and social care together in localities, with a single budget and single commissioning. I think that we need to work across parties to come up with an ultimate long-term settlement for the NHS and the carersystem.

Families are also in the invidious position of being asked to provide, in effect, a top-up for care if they want their loved one to remain at home, rather than being forced into a care home. That is fine for those who can do it, but not good for those who cannot afford it. It is also completely contrary to any notion of personalisation—the concept of the person, what is important to them and their priorities being at the heart of decision making—which the Government accept. When I was working with the Conservative party in coalition, we passed the Care Act 2014. Its fundamental principle was the individual’s wellbeing, yet now are saying to people, “No, you’re going to go into a care home because it’s cheaper.” That is not acceptable, but it is happening around the country.

Maggie Throup: I will give way for the last time.

Norman Lamb: I will give way for the last time.

Maggie Throup: The right hon. Gentleman is very generous. He makes a strong case, but sometimes people’s healthcare needs are so great that it is impractical for them to be looked after in their own homes, so things are not quite as cut and dry as he is indicating.
Norman Lamb: If there are good medical reasons, people can of course have the discussion and it might be decided that a care home is the right place, but I am talking about cases in which the only issue is the finances. People are told, “It costs 10% more to provide care at home. You’re going into a care home.” That is not acceptable, but it is happening.

The BBC reported on a family who were paying a top-up of £250 a week. Top-ups are not permissible under the legislation, but that is happening around the country. The BBC gave a case study of a man in Salford, paralysed from the neck down, who was entitled to NHS continuing care. His entitlement was assessed as 168 hours a week, but the CCG was willing to pay for only 105 hours. What was the result? He has been stuck in hospital since Easter in the way that the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) described. It is outrageous. Another case highlighted by the BBC was that of Mark in Norwich, who has type 2 spinal muscular atrophy, a progressive muscle-wasting condition, and very limited mobility. He has had a personal health budget worth £73,000 for the last six years, but it has now been cut by a third. How does he cope with a reduced care package when he has such a condition, which is deteriorating as he lives longer?

The Equality and Human Rights Commission has written to the 44 CCGs with the most disturbing policies of hard caps to make it clear that it is a breach of human rights law if people are deprived of the option of living at home and therefore the right to a family life. There are also concerns that there is an expectation in the costing of the care package that people will work for the minimum wage. Of course some people work for the minimum wage, and they should be accorded the utmost respect, but much of the work involved is complex and challenging, so it is very disturbing if there is an assumption that only minimum wage work is undertaken.

NHS England expects efficiency savings from the continuing healthcare system. That cost £3.1 billion in 2015-16, which was 4% of the total CCG spend. The figure is expected to rise to £5.2 billion by 2020-21 because of increased demand. In its efficiency plan, NHS England requires CCGs to achieve efficiency savings of £855 million by 2020-21, but how? The National Audit Office found that only £149 million is spent on administration, which is where efficiency savings can be made, so I will be grateful if the Minister explains how that efficiency saving can be achieved except by cutting people’s care plans, which is in my view intolerable.

Then there are the delays, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) mentioned. The national framework says that people should know the outcome within 28 days, but long delays are common across the country. The National Audit Office said that a third of cases meeting the 48-hour timeframe. Many CCGs did not know how long they were taking, and 57,000 people waited longer in 2015-16. Delays can mean that people with a terminal illness are stuck in hospital, unable to die in the place of their choice. When I was a Minister, I introduced a legal right to a personal health budget, but we find again and again that arbitrary caps are being placed on personal health budgets, and that people are expected to accept a care plan that involves a percentage reduction compared with what the cost of provision would be for authorities.

There is an enormous case for reform. I have argued for an NHS and care convention that brings the parties together to come up with a rational solution that meets people’s needs and does not treat them in this rather disgusting way, especially when so much stress and anxiety is involved in coping with someone with very considerable care needs, especially at the end of their life. The system is arbitrary, costly, bureaucratic and enormously variable around the country. It involves no democratic accountability or justification, and it undermines the principle of putting the patient first. What are the Government going to do about it?

10.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price): I thank the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) for securing the debate and giving the House a chance to discuss NHS continuing healthcare. He has achieved a pretty good attendance here tonight, given that it is a Monday on a one-line Whip, which is symptomatic of the interest in the subject. I find that heartening, and he spoke with great sincerity and passion about his concerns. We are grateful to him for that; I know that he thinks very deeply about this subject.

This subject provides challenges, as the right hon. Gentleman pointed out, and he made some valid points about the problems facing the continuing healthcare system. In particular, the Government are aware of issues around variation and the complexity in the system. He highlighted some important examples of that. He also highlighted discrepancies, which he was right to raise. We all recognise the frustration that many members of the public sometimes have with the current system. For those with complex needs, and their families, the process can be very difficult to understand, which can lead to stress and confusion at an already difficult time in their lives. We will know that variation in the system has been a concern for some time. First, I will set out what the Government are doing to address those things and to try to achieve consistency, before I turn to some of the other concerns.

Decisions about NHS continuing healthcare are important and have a big impact on people’s lives, which is why it is right that there is a careful and considered decision-making process in place, which must take into account each individual’s care and support needs. My officials are currently working on updating the NHS continuing healthcare national framework, which is the national guidance that underpins the system. That will help health and social care professionals across the country to apply the framework more consistently and effectively, and improve the experience for individuals. We are working with NHS England, local authorities and key stakeholder organisations such as the Continuing Healthcare Alliance and other charities on this update, to ensure that we draw on the full range of experience and knowledge. Members of the public with experience of NHS continuing healthcare have also made a valuable contribution to this process.
I would like to reassure the House that this update to the national framework will not affect eligibility for NHS continuing healthcare, or the extent of the service provided by the NHS. Instead, the update aims to clarify the process and improve outcomes for patients, carers and their families, and those working in the health and care system. The Department will publish this update to the national framework in the new year. However, we understand that these changes alone are not enough to deliver all the necessary improvements, particularly on issues such as the variation in eligibility decisions that the right hon. Gentleman highlighted. That is why we are working closely to support NHS England with its NHS continuing healthcare improvement programme.

The aim of the improvement programme is to consider how NHS continuing healthcare services can be improved by addressing key areas of concern—namely, variation in patient and carer experiences, and ensuring that assessments occur in the right place and at right time. That issue has also been raised in the debate tonight. The programme will set national standards of practice and strengthen links between other NHS England work programmes that promote the personalisation of care.

To some extent, there will always be some variation in NHS continuing healthcare eligibility rates, and that can be due to a wide range of reasons, such as the age dispersion within a local population, variation in levels of health need between geographical areas and the availability of community services, including step-down beds, intermediate care, rehabilitation services and end-of-life services. However, NHS England analysis shows that variation in NHS continuing healthcare eligibility is reducing over time. Work to address variation has already seen improvements, with an approximate 7% reduction in the distribution of variation across standard NHS continuing healthcare eligibility decisions since 2013-14, but the National Audit Office report shows that we obviously have some way to go.

The NHS continuing healthcare assessment process has also been mentioned tonight, and NHS England has introduced a quality premium for 2017 to 2019 to incentivise clinical commissioning groups to carry out more than 80% of assessments within 28 days. Clinical commissioning groups with the highest number of delayed cases are required to establish improvement plans setting out key milestones and planned improvement measures.

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned the claim that budgets are effectively being capped, but I want to emphasise that the national framework for NHS continuing healthcare makes it clear that the starting point for agreeing an NHS continuing healthcare package and the setting where NHS continuing healthcare services are to be provided should be based on the individual’s preferences. However, in some situations, a model of support preferred by the individual will be more expensive than other options and clinical commissioning groups can take comparative costs and value for money into account when determining the model of support to be provided. None the less, the principle that healthcare is free at the point of delivery should and does stand.

Right hon. and hon. Members also raised the breach of human rights and the challenges made to some CCGs. We are interested in the thinking behind that and will explore such issues further.

The right hon. Gentleman discussed the wide variation in the conversion rate of assessments. In his constituency, the conversion rate of 24% appears low when compared with the national average of 31%, but that has to be set against the fact that standard NHS continuing healthcare is currently available for 68.13 per 50,000 people compared with a national average of 43.04 per 50,000 people. I make that point because meaningful comparisons are difficult, but he is right to highlight such issues so that we can satisfy ourselves that we are delivering the commitments in the Care Act 2014, which states that no one should be deprived of care if it is based on their need.

The right hon. Gentleman suggested that some clinical opinions were being questioned, so I want to make the Government’s position clear. CCGs must have regard to the guidance, which states:

“Financial issues should not be considered as part of the decision on an individual’s eligibility for NHS continuing healthcare, and it is important that the process of considering and deciding eligibility does not result in any delay to treatment or to appropriate care being put in place.”

All hon. Members should ensure that that is being adhered to and make appropriate challenges where we believe it is not. The Government and NHS England are looking at strengthening our assurance processes to ensure that those standards are met and that CCGs comply with the national framework. Since April this year, that now includes extended quarterly reporting of NHS continuing healthcare data metrics and robust improvement monitoring, including on eligibility and assessment conversion rates.

I know that the right hon. Gentleman wrote to NHS England about the performance of North Norfolk CCG. I am sure that he is waiting for the outcome of the review with some interest, and I will not be surprised if I hear from him again on this. I am grateful for his interest in this subject and for the spirit in which he made his comments.

As we are all living longer, the challenges to the health service and the care system are becoming ever greater, and he is absolutely right to highlight the need for cross-party co-operation as we address these issues and set the long-term future of care and health on a more sustainable footing.

Rosie Cooper: I understand how the system should be and how the Minister wishes it to be, but our comments tonight have been about how the system is. We can make information available to the Minister about instances that show the system is not working as she describes. I have a constituent with a severe spinal injury who was getting continuing healthcare. There was a tick-box exercise that she thought was just a review, but, nine or 12 months later, the care has been taken away.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I would be happy to look into that case. I have received advice that continuing healthcare packages for lifestyle or physical conditions are often altered depending on progress. The guidance under the framework is quite clear on what is applicable, who is eligible and what conditions are not eligible. Where there is a question on whether obligations are being met under the law—the obligations are enshrined in the Care Act and under the NHS principle that all treatment should be free at the point of delivery—the hon. Lady is right to make that challenge. I am more than happy to investigate that case.
I am running out of time, and I am sure this will not be the last time we address this issue, so I conclude by thanking the right hon. Member for North Norfolk for securing the debate and thanking all hon. Members who have shown an interest. This debate bodes well for our discussions over the coming months on these vital subjects.

It is vital that we continue to work closely with NHS England, local authorities and key stakeholders to improve the system for everyone. There is a lot of work to do and, although the direction of travel in some respects is positive, as with all these things, we are all less patient than we would like to be.

I hope the right hon. Gentleman can appreciate that the Government and NHS England are very much aware of the challenges in this area, both in his constituency and in the constituencies of other hon. Members. I am confident that the steps we are all taking to improve the system are the right ones and will deliver an improved experience for patients, families and carers based on a more consistent application of eligibility and variation.

*Question put and agreed to.*

10.27 pm

*House adjourned.*
Oral Answers to Questions

Mr Speaker in the Chair

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—

Low-paid Workers: Wage Growth

1. Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): What steps his Department is taking to support wage growth for low-paid workers.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): The national living wage will rise to £7.83 from April 2018. In total, that represents a pay rise of over £2,000 for a full-time minimum wage worker since the introduction of the national living wage in 2016, which has helped to reduce the proportion of full-time jobs that are low paid to the lowest level in at least 20 years. At the same time, in-work benefits support the incomes of poorer households and universal credit will mean that it always pays to progress in work. Sustainable long-term pay growth relies on improving productivity, which is why we are increasing the national productivity investment fund to more than £31 billion.

Tommy Sheppard: The Chancellor’s predecessor, George Osborne, boasted that the minimum wage would be more than £9 an hour by 2020. That forecast has now been downgraded. Now that we are in the middle of the longest fall in living standards in history, why should the very poorest people pay for the crisis? They will lose £500 a year compared with the promise that they were made just this spring.

Mr Hammond: As I have just pointed out, those on the national living wage have actually gained £2,000 a year. The commitment on the national living wage was, and remains, that it will reach 60% of median earnings, and it will continue to do so. On the hon. Gentleman’s other point, he will note that real household disposable income per head, a much more appropriate measure of living standards, is almost 5% higher in 2016 than it was in 2010.

Mr Hammond: The best policy for Britain, including for the wages of British workers, is to get a good deal with the European Union that secures high levels of access to European markets after we leave the EU, and that is what we intend to do.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): In my constituency, one key thing that is important to wage growth is to ensure that we attract businesses that create high-skilled and high-paid jobs. Will my right hon. Friend join me in encouraging all of those involved in future developments, including the redevelopment of the Rugeley B power station, to ensure that we attract high-tech and innovative businesses?

Mr Hammond: Yes. Indeed, that was the central theme of the Budget. If we are to ensure prosperity for all our people in the future, we must embrace the technologies and businesses of the future and create the jobs of the future. We must be prepared to invest in the infrastructure that is needed to support them and in giving our people the skills that they will need to take advantage of those high-paid jobs.

Mr Hammond: Yes. Indeed, that was the central theme of the Budget. If we are to ensure prosperity for all our people in the future, we must embrace the technologies and businesses of the future and create the jobs of the future. We must be prepared to invest in the infrastructure that is needed to support them and in giving our people the skills that they will need to take advantage of those high-paid jobs.

Mr Hammond: I am sure the hon. Gentleman knows that the blanket pay cap across the public sector has indeed been removed—that was announced in July by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss). That will mean that individual Secretaries of State can look at the particular circumstances of the workforces for which they are responsible—recruitment and retention challenges and opportunities for improving workforce efficiency—and make proposals to the pay review bodies accordingly.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Will the Chancellor confirm that Conservatives want people to keep more of the wages that they earn and that, when we came to power in April 2010, disgracefully, people earning as little as £6,500 a year had to pay income tax?

Mr Hammond: Yes, £11,850—my hon. Friend is exactly
Mr Cryer: With households facing stagnating wages, high inflation and soaring household debt and austerity, why have this Government not followed the Scottish example and ended the public sector pay cap?

Mr Hammond: I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman was listening to the answer that I gave to the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) a few moments ago. We have ended the blanket pay cap across the public sector and are allowing Secretaries of State to make recommendations to the pay review bodies that reflect the circumstances of their individual workforces.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): My constituency is in the top 10 constituencies for the highest proportion of people on the minimum wage, so the rise to £7.83 will be most welcome. Does the Chancellor agree that moves such as that and increasing the personal allowance will help us to further reduce income inequality in my constituency and the country at large?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend is exactly right. The uncomfortable fact for the Opposition Front Benchers is that income inequality in this country is now the lowest it has been since the mid-1980s—lower than it was at any point during the 13 years of the Labour Government.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Will the Chancellor confirm that, according to last month's Office for National Statistics figures, median disposable income is £600 higher than in the previous year and £1,000 higher than before the 2008 crash? Does he agree that it is the policies of this Government, with their jobs miracle, that have made that possible?

Mr Hammond: Yes, and it is one of this Government’s proudest achievements that we have created 3 million new jobs in this country since 2010. The right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) might reflect on his prediction in 2011 that the Government’s policies would cost the economy 1 million jobs. That turned out to be slightly wide of the mark.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): The gender pay gap has fallen by only 0.4% in the past five years. If that trend continues, it will take 113 years for women to be on an equal footing. Why is the Chancellor not doing more for women who are paid less than men?

Mr Hammond: It is a priority of the Government to continue to close the gender pay gap, which is now at its lowest level ever.

Mr Speaker: I call Kirsty Blackman.

Kirsty Blackman: Sorry, Mr Speaker; I had intended to ask my second question during topical questions.

Mr Speaker: Ah—I had been advised that the hon. Lady wished to proffer a second inquiry now. We will wait in eager anticipation for her second contribution at a later stage of our proceedings. Lacking her, let us hear Mr Cryer.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

In reference to the Chancellor’s first answer, what is the connection between low wage growth and the slump in productivity?

Mr Hammond: As the hon. Gentleman will know, in the end wages can only be paid for by the productive output of workers. Increasing the productivity of workers in the British economy, so that they can produce more and earn more in a way that allows their firms to remain competitive while paying them more, is the way forward, and that is what the Government will pursue.

Universal Credit: Household Income

2. Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the effect of the roll-out of universal credit on levels of household income.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): Universal credit has already been very successful in getting more people into work by ensuring that work always pays, and that has boosted household incomes.

Danielle Rowley: I am not surprised that the Government announced small changes to their discredited universal credit programme in the Budget last week, following months of criticism, unanimous defeat on an Opposition day motion, discontent across the whole House, rising debt arrears and even evictions. But what is surprising is that, rather than halt the botched roll-out and fix the failing system, the Government have chosen to put back only £1 for every £10 cut from the system.

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): Give way!

Danielle Rowley: No, thank you.

Will the Minister accept that it is now a matter of urgency that proper action is taken to address the real human suffering imposed on our communities by this roll-out?

Elizabeth Truss: I think we should remember the 1.4 million people who spent the previous decade under Labour trapped in poverty because every pound they earned was taken away in benefits. We have introduced universal credit so that every extra hour of work pays, and all the evidence suggests that it is much better than the previous scheme. Employment pays, and people on universal credit are more likely to be in work.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Would my right hon. Friend like to comment on the irresponsible scare stories put out by the BBC—first on Radio 4, then on “BBC Breakfast”, on its website and across all its media platforms—that up to 100,000 people on in-work universal credit would receive no benefits over the Christmas period?

Elizabeth Truss: I think it is disgraceful that that fake news was put out on our national broadcaster, when universal credit is actually helping people get into work and earn extra money. It is particularly poor that some of the lowest-income people in our society have been unnecessarily worried when, in fact, under universal credit, everybody can receive an advance on their payment.
Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): Even after the Budget’s limited changes to universal credit, it will still make young single-parent families with school-age children £6,000 a year worse off—those are OBR figures. We should remember that without further action to stop that, the Government will push 1 million additional children into poverty. I would like to know what they will do about that.

Elizabeth Truss: I can tell the hon. Lady that poverty and income inequality are, in fact, at a 30-year low, thanks to this Government’s policies. What universal credit does—rather than leaving people on the scrapheap, which is what happened under the Labour Government—is help people get into work. What we have seen is that the fastest growth in employment has been among the lowest-income people in our society.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I welcome the changes in universal credit announced in the Budget speech. Did my right hon. Friend note that, in its Budget analysis, the Institute for Fiscal Studies described the changes in universal credit as “well targeted at those who find it difficult to cope with the six week wait”?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. What we have been doing is making changes to universal credit to make sure it works for absolutely everybody. We have rolled it out gradually to make sure it is effective, unlike the previous botched efforts of tax credits under the previous Labour Government. We have learned the lessons. We are helping more people get into employment. We have the lowest unemployment since 1975, and the people who have benefited most are the lowest earners in our society.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Universal credit is being rolled out in Bishop Auckland over Christmas, affecting 10,000 households. On the Government’s figures, we know that it will take £20 million out of the local economy. Surely the Minister can see that that is bad for jobs and bad for local shops.

Elizabeth Truss: With respect, I do not think the hon. Lady is taking into account the extra income that those families will earn because they are more likely to be in work under universal credit. That is where the benefit is.

Major Digital Infrastructure

4. John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What recent investment the Government has made in major digital infrastructure. [902585]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Jones): The Government are investing more than £1 billion to stimulate the market to build the next-generation digital infrastructure the UK needs for its future. At the autumn Budget, we launched a £190 million challenge fund for gold-standard full fibre broadband, provided £160 million to develop 5G networks and invested £35 million to improve mobile connectivity for rail passengers.

John Lamont: Last week, I held a Westminster Hall debate on the Scottish Government’s catastrophic failure to deliver superfast broadband for rural communities across Scotland. In that debate, the Minister for Digital confirmed that millions of pounds of taxpayers’ money has not been released by the Scottish Government to help roll out superfast broadband. What discussions has my hon. Friend had with Ministers from the Scottish Government to ensure that money gets to where it needs to be—rural communities in need of better broadband service?

Andrew Jones: The Government are supporting the roll-out of superfast broadband right across the UK, and that has included allocating more than £120 million to help the Scottish Government deliver 100% superfast coverage in Scotland by 2021. To be specific, the Minister for Digital discussed progress with the Scottish Government on 6 November and had further discussions this week.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): This is not good enough. If we are going to tackle the appalling productivity levels in our country, we need to invest in this sort of infrastructure, we need to invest in skills and we need to invest in top-class management. The Minister should get his act together and do it.

Andrew Jones: I think the hon. Gentleman may have missed some of the announcements in the Budget. Perhaps I could highlight one in particular: the £740 million from the national productivity investment fund that has been allocated for digital infrastructure.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman) is looking more upbeat than ever. Let’s hear the fella!

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker; it is nice to be back. I welcome, on behalf of my constituents, the digital announcement in the Budget last week—and the sight of a grown-up team in charge of the economy, unlike the reheated Marxists opposite. On productivity, does the Minister agree that we need public sector leadership to create a private-public partnership on digital infrastructure? May I also welcome the announcement in the Budget of a public sector leadership academy, so that we can invest in our public sector leaders?

Andrew Jones: My hon. Friend makes a typically insightful point. Digital improvement is one of the key drivers in improving our productivity, so I am happy to agree entirely with his wise points.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): When will local authorities be told the basis on which they will be invited to apply for the new money that the Government have earmarked? Will the Minister assure me that it will be distributed on the basis of an area’s need, and not just the population numbers?

Andrew Jones: I will look into the point that the right hon. Gentleman raises and write to him with the answer.
Air Passenger Duty: Regional Airports

5. **Steve Double** (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): What recent assessment has he made of the effect of air passenger duty on smaller regional airports. [902586]

**The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride):** The Government recognise the importance of regional airports, not least for the productivity of smaller local communities. That is why, despite the fact that there is no VAT on airline tickets or duty on aviation fuel, we have frozen the APD rate for long-haul economy flights, as was announced in the Budget.

**Steve Double:** I thank the Minister for that reply. Many of the flights from our regional airports are internal domestic flights, on which passengers end up paying APD twice—on both legs of their journey. To support our smaller regional airports, will he consider cutting APD on internal flights by 50%, as I believe we will be able to once we leave the EU?

**Mel Stride:** My hon. Friend raises an interesting point. This is something that we have looked to address in the past. In 1998, the European Commission ruled that we were unable to do that under state aid rules, but of course once we have left the European Union, depending on the details of the agreement under which we do that, we may be able to revisit this.

**Catherine McKinnell** (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): The Treasury’s own modelling shows that Newcastle airport in my constituency will be the most affected by the devolution of air passenger duty to Scotland, so what progress have the Government made on ensuring that any impact is mitigated for English regional airports?

**Mel Stride:** As I have said, in this Budget we have frozen APD for long-haul economy flights. That comes on the back of a number of actions that we have taken over the years to reduce APD. In 2014, we cut it and exempted children from it on economy flights. We will continue to review it, as we do all taxes, in the light of the issues that the hon. Lady has raised.

**Mr Gregory Campbell** (East Londonderry) (DUP): In the light of the Chancellor’s very welcome announcement last week about a possible review of air passenger duty in Northern Ireland, will the Minister take account of the fact that all our airports—Belfast City, Belfast International and Londonderry—suffer a very serious disadvantage when competing with airports in the Irish Republic, which all have significantly lower APD, and review matters accordingly?

**Mel Stride:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. In the Budget, the Chancellor made it very clear that we will have a full call for evidence and undertake a review of matters relating to both APD and VAT, and their impact on tourism, which we recognise is so vital to the Northern Ireland economy.

Regional Economic Growth

6. **Dan Jarvis** (Barnsley Central) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to support regional economic growth. [902587]

**The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond):** The Government recognise the importance of closing the economic gap between regions of our country as an economic and social priority, and the industrial strategy is focused on doing that. If we eliminated just half of the productivity gap with London, we would add £300 billion to our gross domestic product; that is £4,600 for every man, woman and child in this country. That is why the Budget announced a raft of measures designed to move forward our progress on that.

**Dan Jarvis:** The economic case for a wider Yorkshire devolved settlement is compelling, so much so that in Yorkshire it is supported by the CBI, the Institute of Directors, the Federation of Small Businesses, the TUC and many of the Chancellor’s own colleagues in local government. Does he recognise the strength of the economic argument, and, if he does, can he speak to his colleagues in the Department for Communities and Local Government?

**Mr Hammond:** The Government are committed to the Sheffield city region deal, which will bring £1 billion of new Government investment to the area. We recognise the debate that is going on about a possible wider Yorkshire-based deal and we are happy to consider that, if it can be done in a way that does not disrupt the existing deal that has been agreed for the Sheffield city region.

**Seema Malhotra** (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): What steps his Department is taking to improve regional productivity. [902594]

**Mr Hammond:** We know some of the things that drive our low productivity performance. Regional differences are one of them, and others are low levels of capital investment in private businesses, relatively low levels of public infrastructure investment and poor skills. We set out in the Budget a raft of measures that will address all of them. The end result is that this Government, on average, over this Parliament will be investing £25 billion a year more in real terms than the Labour Government invested over their period in office.

**Mr Richard Bacon** (South Norfolk) (Con): To encourage economic growth in Stoke, the local council is offering serviced plots of land to finance directors and managing directors to build big houses, bring their businesses and invest, creating more jobs and more economic growth. Does the Chancellor agree that that model could be followed elsewhere? Does he agree that it shows that, as in all other areas of social policy, self-build and custom house building has a great deal to offer, including for economic growth?

**Mr Hammond:** My hon. Friend has been consistent in arguing the case for the promotion of self-build and custom house building, which has an important role
to play in our ambition of delivering 300,000 new net additional homes a year by the middle of the next decade.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming the potential for £40 billion of investment in the north-east of Scotland region oil and gas industry, as a direct result of the tax relief announced in the Budget, and could he encourage the SNP and Scottish Labour to get on board?

Mr Hammond: I am absolutely happy to agree with my hon. Friend. The North sea as a basin is coming towards the end of its life, but none the less there are very large amounts of economic activity in the region and potentially significant receipts to the Treasury. The measure that we have taken will stimulate economic growth in the region and, if all goes well, generate a windfall to the UK Exchequer.

7. Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Chancellor is right to say that poor productivity levels and regional variations in them are closely linked to skills and education, and he will know that that starts in the very earliest years of a child’s life. So will he look kindly on a bid he has had from Greater Manchester to boost school readiness in the early years? It is a small amount of money, but it could really innovate and transform these arrangements.

Mr Hammond: I heard what the hon. Lady said, and my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones) tells me that he is meeting the Mayor of Manchester next week to discuss this issue.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Thanks to this Government’s investment of £22 million pledged via the local enterprise partnership, Cheltenham can look forward with confidence to a cyber-hub, creating a centre of cyber-excellence in the home of GCHQ. Is that not exactly the kind of project that will drive opportunity and boost productivity in constituencies such as mine?

Mr Hammond: It is. GCHQ is a world-class resource. The way it has engaged in seeking to use its expertise to create a world-class cyber-security business sector in the UK economy is exemplary, and we should encourage it.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): No wonder the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman) referred to a leadership academy; three quarters of the Cabinet are queuing up to get into it. What impact does the Chancellor think a £1 billion, two-year grant—equivalent, let us say, to the one he gave to Northern Ireland—would have on regional economic growth in, for example, the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) in the Sheffield city region?

Mr Hammond: I do not like to blow my own trumpet, but on the whole I think my jokes were better than the hon. Gentleman’s. As I said to the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), the Sheffield city region deal would bring £1 billion of new Government investment into the area, which will stimulate local economic growth and job creation, and support upskilling in the area and improvement of the infrastructure. Doing these deals around the country and making funds available to local authorities—they know best what is necessary for their areas—is the way to deliver enhanced economic growth.

Peter Dowd: I will give the Chancellor another opportunity to answer a similar question in relation to improving regional productivity. What would be the impact in, let us say, the south-west region, in the constituency of his hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), if the Chancellor provided for that area a £1 billion, two-year grant commensurate with that for Northern Ireland?

Mr Hammond: There are many things in which we can invest in every region of the country, and I am pretty confident that I could take £1 billion to any region of the UK and invest it in a way that would enhance productivity and stimulate economic growth.

Manufacturing Industry: Lesser Duty Rule

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): When we leave the European Union, we will ensure that we have a robust remedies regime in place. It will ensure that we have robust measures to take against dumping, excessive subsidy and import surges. Part of that will be a lesser duty rule, as we have with the European Union at present, to ensure that the measures we take are proportionate in protecting our producers at the same time as protecting the interests of consumers and other downstream businesses.

Gareth Snell: I thank the Financial Secretary for that answer, but he will be aware that the provisions of the Taxation (Cross-border Trade) Bill will be some of the least generous in World Trade Organisation countries once we have left the European Union. Will he meet me and the British Ceramic Confederation, which genuinely wishes to work with him to make the Bill better, so that we can protect British manufacturing once we are outside the EU?

Mel Stride: Yes, I will.

Government Expenditure: Young People

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure that young people are not disproportionately affected by reductions in Government expenditure.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): Next year, we will start paying down the debt for the first time in 17 years, which will reduce the burden on future generations and help our young people.

Faisal Rashid: Today’s state of the nation report makes very clear the barriers to social mobility facing many young people in England. Given this Government’s record of cuts to social funding and school funding, raising tuition fees, high youth unemployment and failure to produce affordable housing for families and young
people, these findings are not surprising. What action will the Minister take to combat the intergenerational divide for young people right across the country?

Elizabeth Truss: I point out to the hon. Gentleman that youth unemployment rose under the previous Labour Government and was 20% when they left office. They let down young people, with stagnating standards in English and maths, rampant grade inflation and rising youth unemployment. Under this Government, we are increasing the number of apprenticeships; we have improved the school curriculum; we have brought in new academies and free schools; and youth unemployment is at its lowest level for over 13 years.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the railcard extension for under-30s announced in last week’s Budget will support young people by significantly lowering their commuting costs and encourage more of them into employment?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is right that that will of course help young people. We have introduced the stamp duty cut for first-time buyers, which will help many in their 20s and 30s to get on to the housing ladder for the first time. We are also putting new money into maths and computer science to help young people get the skills they need to succeed in the modern economy.

UK Economic Growth

9. Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): What assessment he has made of recent trends in UK economic growth.

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Stephen Barclay): The UK economy is fundamentally strong: we have seen 19 consecutive quarters of growth; unemployment is at its lowest level for 42 years; and the Office for Budget Responsibility forecasts that a further 600,000 people will be in work by 2022.

Eddie Hughes: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is only by investing heavily in productivity and infrastructure, such as the new junction 10 of the M6 in Walsall, that we can truly build a Britain that is fit for the future?

Stephen Barclay: I very much agree. It is for that reason that the Budget set out a devolution 2 deal with Andy Street, including £250 million for transport schemes such as junction 10 of the M6.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): To enable economic growth among small and medium-sized enterprises in Northern Ireland, they need superfast broadband. That is critical in bringing more jobs, more opportunities and better wages, and in balancing work and family life. Will the Minister outline what he will do to ensure that that happens?

Stephen Barclay: It is for investment of exactly the sort the hon. Gentleman mentions that we have invested in the national productivity investment fund, including a further £8 billion that was set out in the Budget.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): The Office for Budget Responsibility forecasts last week did show the UK economy growing over the forecast period, but only just. My hon. Friend will be aware that much of the economic growth has relied on household spending. Is he also aware of the Bank of England’s financial stability report, published this morning, which shows that household finances are starting to deteriorate somewhat? Can he provide confidence that the Government are aware of that and say what they are doing to help households maintain their balance sheets?

Stephen Barclay: I know that the Treasury Committee, which my right hon. Friend chairs, and the Financial Policy Committee keep that matter under constant review. It is always assessed in line with the cyclical buffers that the FPC sets for the banks.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Economic Secretary explain why the Government have decided to sell their shares in RBS now, at a loss of over £26 billion? The public bailed out RBS and have sustained its losses and paid its fines. Why, just as it appears to be on the brink of returning to profit, should the public not only miss out, but make a massive loss? Is it not the case that selling those shares and reclassifying housing association debt is the only way that the Government can claim that net debt is falling?

Stephen Barclay: The Government are not selling the shares now. The Budget set out our intention, which it has always been, to return the bank to the private sector and sell those shares by the end of 2018–19. I am sure the hon. Gentleman recognises that the balance sheet is half the size it was in 2008, when his party paid 502p a share. The bank is therefore in a very different place from the mess we inherited from the Labour party.

National Living Wage

10. David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): For what reasons the national living wage does not extend to people under 25 years old.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): In the Budget, we announced the largest increases to the minimum wage youth rates in 10 years. On average, they increased by 4.9%, which was greater than the increase for the over-25s.

David Linden: I am afraid that the argument the Government have put forward blows a hole in the idea that they are building a country that works for everyone. The reality is that under-25s are not included in the national living wage. Why do we have state-sanctioned pay poverty under this Government and why, shamefully, are apprentices paid as little as £3.70 per hour under the national living wage?

Elizabeth Truss: As I have just pointed out, younger workers are getting a bigger rise than those over the age of 25. The reason there is a lower rate is that it is vital to ensure that young people get into work, get work experience and build up their skills. We do not want to end up where we were at the end of the Labour Government, with 20% youth unemployment and young people losing out on opportunities for life.
Major Infrastructure Projects

12. Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): What plans the Government have to invest in major infrastructure projects during the 2017 Parliament. [902595]

15. Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): What plans the Government have to invest in major infrastructure during the 2017 Parliament. [902599]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): We are expanding the national productivity investment fund to provide £31 billion of investment. That includes a £1.7 billion transport fund to transform our great cities and a more than doubling of the housing infrastructure fund to £5 billion. We have published the “National Infrastructure and Construction Pipeline” and are delivering the largest rail modernisation since Victorian times, the biggest road investment programme since the 1970s and two of the largest engineering projects in Europe—Crossrail and HS2. Taken together, that means that the Government will invest, on average, £25 billion more per annum in real terms than was invested during the 1997 to 2010 Government.

Lucy Frazer: I welcome the investment in infrastructure, in particular in the Oxford to Cambridge corridor, which will bring significant benefit to my area. It is important that when we plan more houses, we get the infrastructure in place before the housing. Does the Chancellor agree with that proposition?

Mr Hammond: I agree with my hon. and learned Friend. The Cambridge-Milton Keynes-Oxford corridor has the potential to be a globally significant growth corridor, and I agree with the National Infrastructure Commission that to realise this potential we need a joined-up plan that covers jobs, homes and infrastructure. Local and national Government must work together, with developers and investors, to align the delivery of these elements and ensure that infrastructure is in place to support housing growth in the corridor.

Mrs Murray: Over the last few months, we have seen many accidents on the main artery through my constituency, the A38. I am currently working with partners to ensure the much-needed urgent improvements on the road. Will the Treasury make sure that the extra investment in our roads can enable this work to get under way?

Mr Hammond: Yes, we have committed to investing over £2 billion in the strategic road network in the south-west, including the first steps towards transforming the A303-A358 route and upgrading sections of the A30. Safety is one of the Government’s top priorities, and improvements to strategic roads with safety concerns, such as the A38, will be considered for inclusion within the portfolio of schemes in the second road investment strategy.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The Chancellor will know that even after the Budget the south-east and London will still receive a disproportionate share of infrastructure spending. Will he undertake to give an annual report to Parliament detailing both the spending and the likely economic impact of that spending across different regions?

Mr Hammond: I am certainly happy to look at the information we hold and whether it could be presented in a way that satisfies the hon. Gentleman’s requirements. It is a legitimate question. Much of this infrastructure investment will have an impact across the country. For example, investment in HS2 will benefit parts of the north of England far more than many of the areas through which the railway will run.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): With all this money swilling about for major infrastructure investment, will the Chancellor explain why the rail funding formula has been ignored and Scotland’s rail budget has been cut by £600 million over the next investment period?

Mr Hammond: As I understand it—I will correct myself if I am wrong—the allocation to Scotland in Network Rail’s control period 6 investment programme is exactly proportionate to the overall England, Wales and Scotland budget.

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19. [902603] Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): In advance of the huge numbers of additional houses expected to be built in Medway by 2035, plus the additional traffic that will come with the new Thames crossing, and given the congestion issues already facing commuters and trade across north Kent, will the Chancellor outline plans to boost investment in the region’s strategic transport network?

Mr Hammond: Yes, we do have plans, of course, for investment in the region, including the lower Thames crossing project, but I recognise the challenge that my hon. Friend presents. If there is to be a significant expansion of housing in the region, it is essential that the strategic infrastructure be put in place, and it will be essential that we capture uplifted land value to finance it. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government will bring forward proposals in due course to ensure that we can capture land value uplift for that purpose.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): In the last year, the British Government have disgracefully reneged on a promise to electrify the main line to Swansea, and there was no announcement on the Swansea bay tidal lagoon in last week’s Budget, so what specific infrastructure projects in Wales are the British Government investing in?

Mr Hammond: The hon. Gentleman says the Government have reneged on a promise to electrify the railway. What passengers care about is the quality of service, the frequency of service, the reliability of service and the speed of the service, and train technology has moved on, such that all those requirements can be met with the new hybrid trains being deployed on that network.
The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Jones): The UK is a world-leading place to start a business. Start-ups create jobs, attract investment and bring innovative products and services to market. The UK’s small and medium-sized enterprises have created 2 million new jobs since 2010. We want our start-ups to grow and succeed in the new economy, and that is why the Chancellor announced at the Budget a comprehensive package to unlock over £20 billion of new investment in innovative businesses.

Wendy Morton: Start-ups and small businesses, including those in my constituency, form the backbone of local economies. I shall be visiting some of them this weekend as part of Small Business Saturday. Can my hon. Friend update the House on what more is being done to support micro and small businesses?

Andrew Jones: I shall be visiting small businesses in my constituency of Harrogate and Knaresborough as part of Small Business Saturday. I agree entirely with my hon. Friend: small businesses are indeed the backbone of local economies. That is why the Chancellor responded to the No. 1 ask of business in the Budget by announcing a £2.3 billion package to reduce business rates—it follows the business rate relief announced in the 2016 Budget, which was worth approximately £9 billion over five years—and why our modern industrial strategy will provide continued funding for growth hubs to ensure that businesses can access support locally.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): What assessment has the Minister made of the impact on the economy of small businesses that have been started up by disabled entrepreneurs? How can he champion that activity, and harness the full potential of people with disabilities for our economy?

Andrew Jones: The hon. Lady has made a valuable point, and I entirely agree with her. Simply by raising the question in the House and discussing it in our political system, we are highlighting the fact that disability should not be a problem when it comes to starting businesses.

National Debt

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): What progress is being made on reducing the national debt.

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Stephen Barclay): As a result of the Government’s action to bring the public finances back under control, the Office for Budget Responsibility has forecast a sustained reduction in debt as a share of GDP from next year onwards. Debt will fall from 86.5% to 79.1% of GDP by 2022-23. That will be the first sustained decline in debt for 17 years.

Lee Rowley: Is my hon. Friend able to comment on the impact on the economy of increasing debt by £500 billion?

Stephen Barclay: Increasing debt by £500 billion would increase debt interest by £7 billion a year, which would reduce our economic and fiscal resilience, crowd out spending on valuable services, and pass a greater debt burden to future generations.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Further to the answer that the Minister gave a few minutes ago on the sale of RBS shares to deal with Government debt, can he confirm that the Government will abide by the commitment of the Chancellor’s predecessor not to sell below the acquisition price?

Stephen Barclay: As the right hon. Gentleman will have heard from my earlier reply, that bank is in a very different place from where it was in 2008 when the shares were purchased. That reflects the action that has been taken to simplify the balance sheet and to make the bank safer and more streamlined.

Youth Unemployment

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): What progress is being made on reducing youth unemployment.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): Youth unemployment has decreased by 8.3% since 2010 and is now at its lowest rate for more than 13 years, but we are not complacent, which is why we are investing in skills to get more of our young people into jobs.

James Morris: The Government have made significant progress in reducing youth unemployment, but in part of the area that I represent in the black country too many young people are emerging from education with a lack of basic skills, which is holding the region back. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to continue to invest in skills, particularly for those young people who lack basic skills, so that they can take advantage of the opportunities that are out there?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are providing extra money in the Budget to triple the number of computer science teachers and give £600 to every school and sixth-form college where students take core or A-level maths, to ensure that all young people have the best possible start in life.

Topical Questions

T1. Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): The Budget laid out the Government’s vision for a global Britain after we leave the European Union, and our ambitious plans to tackle the long-term challenges that we face so that we can build an economy that is fit for the future. Our balanced approach enables us to give households and businesses the support that they will need in the near term, as well as investing in the future of this country. Through investment in research and development, infrastructure, skills and housing, we will seize the opportunities of a rapidly changing economy, while being fair to the next generation by reducing a national debt that remains too large.

Danielle Rowley: Members will have heard last week about the Government’s failure on productivity and growth and about the OBR’s downward revision of its forecast for the economy over the current Parliament. Can the Chancellor tell us how much worse off someone
on the national living wage will be in 2020, compared with the forecast in March, as a result of the Government’s failure on wages?

Mr Hammond: As I have already told the House today, as a result of the increase that we announced in the Budget, somebody on the national living wage will be £2,000 a year better off than when it was introduced in 2016. That is before tax. If we take into account the effect of the significant increase in the personal allowance threshold, which has reduced tax for 30 million people and taken 4 million people out of tax altogether, the same full-time worker on the national living wage will be £3,600 a year better off compared with 2010.

T2. [902608] Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): Small businesses in my constituency suffer from late payments from their larger clients. Some firms have been forced to accept discounts of up to 10% just to get paid within 90 days. The Government have introduced welcome measures to make large firms behave more transparently on payments, but does the Chancellor stand ready to take further action to stop big firms using small businesses as a source of cheap loans?

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Jones): We know that late payments are a serious issue for many small businesses, and that is why we are acting to tackle unfair practices. As my hon. Friend mentioned, we have legislated to improve transparency, requiring large businesses to report on their payment practices. All 32 of the Government’s strategic suppliers have signed the prompt payment code, and we have appointed Paul Uppal as the UK’s first small business commissioner to support small businesses in resolving disputes with larger firms.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): Why have the Government not brought forward an amendment of the law resolution in today’s Budget resolutions?

Mr Hammond: There will be more than adequate time to discuss the measures in the Finance Bill, but the debate on the Finance Bill is a debate about the measures being put forward by the Government under the Finance Bill. That is what Parliament is here to debate and that is what we will have time to debate under this arrangement.

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): The Government recognise the vital importance of R and D, driving up investment in business and improving our productivity, which is why R and D investment as a proportion of GDP is on the rise, and we will push further towards our target of 2.4%. In the Budget we announced an increase in R and D expenditure tax credits from 11% to 12%.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): In the Budget, more than £1 billion of the so-called extra money for Scotland was in the form of financial transaction money—that is money that the Scottish Government have to pay back. The block grant for spending on frontline services is down £230 million in real terms. How can the Chancellor suggest that a £230 million reduction for Scotland is a good deal for our country?

Elizabeth Truss: Scotland’s spending power has been increased by £2 billion in this Budget, including financial transactions, which support fantastic schemes such as Help to Buy, but what we need to see is the Scottish National party Government using their powers to deliver for Scotland, including by improving their appalling results in English and maths education.

T5. [902611] Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I congratulate the Chancellor on freezing the duty on wine and spirits and ensuring that future changes come into effect only after Christmas, but will he now look at the anomaly whereby excellent English sparkling wine, at 11% strength, is taxed at £2.77 a bottle, compared with just £2.16 for higher strength still wine and just 2p a bottle in France? Post Brexit, will he give a boost to this growing, quality British product?

Andrew Jones: We support the English wine industry, and that is why the autumn Budget announced a freeze on wine duty. Under EU law, duty on higher strength sparkling wine must be the same as that on higher strength sparkling cider, and if we reduced the duty on higher strength sparkling wine, it would mean reducing the duty on a category of alcohol that is effectively associated with problem drinking. I recognise how much
of a champion my hon. Friend is of English wine, and he is right to highlight the fact that there are opportunities ahead.

T4. [902610] Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): We welcome the scrapping of VAT for Scotland’s police and fire services—and this Government finally seeing sense on this issue—but in an interview this year the Conservative MSP Murdo Fraser said that “there is no justification for a VAT refund”.

What does the Chancellor think of that statement? Does he not agree that the £140 million of VAT paid should be reimbursed to our vital emergency services?

Elizabeth Truss: I think that is the closest we are going to get to gratitude from the Scottish National party. The fact is that it was a mistake by the SNP to sign up to that in the devolution agreement. Despite that, we did not want to punish the people of Scotland, which is why we have taken action on that VAT as well as freezing whisky duty, thanks to the representations of our fantastic Scottish Conservative colleagues.

T6. [902612] Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is thanks to Conservative action that today the richest 1% are paying 27% of all income tax revenue? That is more than at any time under Labour, and it makes that gap between rich and poor the lowest on record.

Mr Philip Hammond: My Friend knows that I will. It is only by embracing technology, looking to the future, committing to accepting inevitable changes and working with our workforces and companies to ensure that we are ready for it and ready to take full advantage of it that we can raise living standards sustainably, and that is what we intend to do.

Elizabeth Truss: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, and I can confirm that that is the case.

T7. [902613] Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Chancellor take this opportunity to confirm to the House the statement that the Prime Minister gave to the Manchester Evening News on Sunday evening that the Government will reimburse all the moneys that have fallen on Manchester services as a result of the Arena attack, as well as future costs such as the coroner’s inquest, which is just starting?

Elizabeth Truss: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, and I can confirm that that is the case.

Mr Philip Hammond: The Government are committed to a fair tax system in which those with the broadest shoulders bear the greatest burden, and I am pleased to confirm that my hon. Friend is correct—or almost correct. The latest statistics show that in 2017-18, the top 1% of taxpayers are forecast to pay 28% of all income tax liabilities, and that in 2015-16, income inequality fell to its lowest level since the mid-1980s—under a Conservative Government.

Elizabeth Truss: I am always happy to meet the hon. Gentleman. As he is aware, this is a policy area for the FCA, and I am sure that it will set out further details in due course on how historical debt will be covered.

T8. [902614] Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): The Scottish Government have committed £250,000 to funding four basic income projects across Scotland. This will enable the Scottish Government to make evidence-based policy. Will the UK Government commit themselves to funding a basic income project?

Elizabeth Truss: If the hon. Gentleman is looking for advice on evidence-based policies for Scotland, he needs to look at the education system, for example, where the SNP Government have failed Scottish children and are holding back opportunities.

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): Manufacturers such as Kenwood in Havant are boosting productivity by adopting new techniques and technologies as the fourth industrial revolution accelerates. Will the right hon. Friend continue to support SME growth through R and D and innovation?

Mr Philip Hammond: The Chancellor justify widening the age pay gap for those under 25, which sees a 17-year-old and a 25-year-old starting on the same date in the same job having a wage difference of £3.63 an hour?

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Stephen Barclay): I am always happy to meet the hon. Gentleman. As he is aware, this is a policy area for the FCA, and I am sure that it will set out further details in due course on how historical debt will be covered.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): How can the Chancellor justify widening the age pay gap for those under 25, which sees a 17-year-old and a 25-year-old starting on the same date in the same job having a wage difference of £3.63 an hour?

Elizabeth Truss: As I have said, we are raising the minimum wage for younger workers at a higher rate—4.9% this year—than for the over-25s, but the most important thing is that we help young people to get the experience and training they need to get into workforce, instead of leaving them on the scrapheap, which is what happened under the previous Labour Government.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): As we are about to have a row in the House about documents being published, may I ask about another document that has gone missing in action, namely the Government’s White Paper on services, financial services in particular,
in the light of Brexit? On 16 November, I tabled a question to the Department for Exiting the European Union about when it would be published, but no answer has come as yet. The City of London corporation says that the sector contributes £72 billion to this country’s economy, so it is an important document and I am sure my right hon. Friend agrees.

Mr Philip Hammond: I do agree with my right hon. Friend. Financial services is of course a vital sector. The details of the publication of documents is a matter for DExEU, but as she has raised the matter I will look into it and let her know.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Chancellor tell the House whether the £350 million a week Brexit bonus promised to us by the Foreign Secretary over the weekend has been factored into OBR projections or, indeed, his Budget?

Mr Hammond: The OBR is responsible for the forecasts that it delivers to the House, and Robert Chote outlined publicly the basis of the assumptions that the OBR had made in setting those functions.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Yesterday, I attended a summit organised by East Midlands Councils to consider how we can improve investment and the infrastructure in the region. However, I learned that public expenditure in the east midlands on economic affairs, public transport and, notably, transport is the lowest of any region in the entire country. [Interruption.] I know, Mr Speaker; I was equally as shocked given that it is the finest region in the country. In all seriousness, will the Chancellor commit to ensuring that the mighty east midlands will have its fair share in future?

Andrew Jones: It is important to have a strong level of investment in all the regions of our country. My right hon. Friend is clearly a huge champion for the east midlands, and I have met her in the east midlands to discuss the opportunities there. I can confirm that we will be working together to ensure that the east midlands benefits, particularly from HS2.

Mr Speaker: That will be very heartening to the House, because the Minister is a wise fellow and knows that he would otherwise face the irresistible force of Broxtowe and Bolsover combined. I would fear for the hon. Gentleman’s physical wellbeing.

Anna Soubry: So would I!

Mr Speaker: So would the right hon. Member for Broxtowe.

There is one Member who has not got in, so we must hear from the fella. I call Kevin Hollinrake.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Despite the clear wrongdoings in the banking sector highlighted by the RBS Global Restructuring Group scandal, small and medium-sized enterprises cannot access justice because the banks are too wealthy to sue. The all-party parliamentary group on fair business banking and finance is calling for an independent financial services tribunal to provide accountability. Will my hon. Friend agree to meet me and the group to discuss our proposals?

Stephen Barclay: I am of course happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the proposals. One of the issues the industry has been discussing is the role of the Financial Ombudsman Service and how it can step in to give greater comfort to those who need to bring claims.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): One of the key issues raised on the doorsteps of Corby and east Northamptonshire is the NHS. What difference will the additional spending on the health service announced in the Budget last week make to my constituents?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have seen increasing demand on the NHS, which is why we have put in an extra £6.3 billion to help us achieve our accident and emergency targets, to help to reduce waiting lists and, importantly, to help us ensure that nurses and other public sector workers are able to get the pay rise they deserve.
Leaving the EU: Sectoral Impact Assessments

Mr Speaker: Before I call Sir Keir Starmer to ask his urgent question, I would emphasise to the House that the purpose of selecting this urgent question today is to give an opportunity to the Minister to explain to the House what action the Government have taken in response to the order of the House and an opportunity for other Members to question him on those matters. It is not an occasion for the House to debate whether or not a contempt of the House may have occurred. There may or may not be later occasions for that matter to be discussed. This is the correct procedure, and I know the House will trust me to know of what I speak.

12.37 pm

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union if he will make a statement on the release of the impact assessments arising from sectoral analysis carried out by Her Majesty's Ministers to the Select Committee on Exiting the European Union.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): This House passed a motion on 1 November asking that impact assessments arising from sectoral analyses be provided to the Select Committee on Exiting the European Union. This Government take very seriously their parliamentary responsibilities, and have been clear that they would be providing information to the Committee.

In the past three weeks, Departments have worked to collate and bring together this information in a way that is accessible and informative. I am glad to be able to confirm that this information has been provided not only to the Select Committee on Exiting the European Union but to the House of Lords EU Select Committee and, indeed, to the devolved Administrations. I can also, Mr Speaker, with your permission, inform the House that we have initiated discussions with the parliamentary authorities to make this information available to all colleagues through a reading room.

We were clear from the start that we would respond to the motion, but also that the documents did not exist in the form requested, as has been the case under successive Administrations, that such advice to Ministers must remain private.

In the light of all that, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union made a statement on 7 November in which he explained that, given the documents did not exist in the form requested, it would take “some time to collate and bring together this information in a way that is accessible and informative to the Committee.”—[Official Report, 7 November 2017; Vol. 630, c. 1333.]

He committed that the reports would be provided within three weeks. In providing the information to the Committee yesterday, we have met that commitment. Parliament has endorsed the responsibility of Ministers not to release information that would undermine our negotiating position. Contrary to what has been asserted in some places, the Committee did not give any firm assurances that what was passed to it would not subsequently be published in full. Where there are precedents for Government agreeing to pass information to Select Committees in confidence, these have been on the basis of assurances received before material is shared or a clear set of rules, such as those governing intelligence material.

When he met the Secretary of State, the Chairman of the Select Committee did say that he was willing to enter into a dialogue—after the Select Committee had received documents from the Government. But that is not the same as an assurance that, if we provided confidential or sensitive material, it would not be published, and it is not in keeping with the usual practice of Committees on these sensitive issues. As such, the sectoral reports provided do not contain information that would undermine the UK’s hand in negotiations or material that is commercially or market sensitive. But the House should be in no doubt that this has been a very substantial undertaking. We have been open as possible, subject to the overwhelming national interest of preserving our negotiating position. We have collated more than 800 pages of analysis for the Committees, less than a month from the motion being passed, and this covers all the 58 sectors. We now consider the motion of 1 November 2017 to have been satisfied.

Keir Starmer: “Transparency” and “accountability” are two words this Government do not understand. On 1 November, after a three-hour debate, this House voted in favour of a Humble Address requiring all 58 sectoral analyses to be passed to the Brexit Select Committee—not some of the reports, not redacted copies, but the full reports. The Government did not seek to amend the Humble Address, nor did they vote against the motion. After your advice to us, Mr. Speaker, the Government accepted that the motion was binding. It is simply not open to the Secretary of State to choose to ignore it and to pass to the Select Committee the documents he chooses. Whether he is in contempt of Parliament is a matter we will come to at some later date, but he is certainly treating Parliament with contempt.

The Secretary of State says, and the Minister has reported, that he did not get assurances from the Select Committee about how the documents would be used. The Minister therefore had better answer some pretty blunt questions this afternoon. What assurances were sought that were not given? He had better tread carefully, because there will be an audit trail here and if he cannot answer that question, if he did not pursue the assurances, if he did not suggest a course that was rejected, his cover for not disclosing these documents will be blown.
This is not a game. This is the most important set of decisions this country has taken for decades and they need to be subjected to proper scrutiny. In my experience, the biggest mistakes are made when decisions are not tested.

May I remind the Minister and the Secretary of State that, until this House passed the motion on 1 November, Ministers routinely claimed that these analyses were extensive and authoritative? They say that they have now put the documents together. In September, they answered a freedom of information request. The first question was, “Do you hold the material?” to which the answer was, “Yes.” That calls into serious question the explanation now being put before this House.

Finally, I am deeply concerned that the sum total of documents generated by the Government’s work on the impact on the economy of their approach to Brexit can be squeezed into two lever arch files. That is the volume of paperwork I would have expected for a pretty routine sectoral analysis now being put before this House and discussed by the Select Committee. The analysis describes the activity in each sector and the current regulatory regime for the sector. The report set out existing frameworks from across the globe for how trade is facilitated between countries in the sectors, as well as sector views, which cover a range of representative cross-sector views from businesses and organisations throughout the UK. We have taken care to incorporate up-to-date views from stakeholders, such as views on the proposed implementation period.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman asked: does this represent the sum of the Government’s analysis? Of course it does not. The motion referred to sectoral analyses and we have responded to that motion by sharing those sectoral analyses. I note the Select Committee’s statement following its meeting this morning and I welcome the fact that arrangements will be made for Committee members to view documents in confidence. When they do, I think they will find that there is a great deal of useful and valuable information here. I assure the House and the Committee that the Secretary of State will also be accepting their request to discuss the content.

I assure the House that my Department takes its responsibilities to Parliament extremely seriously. We have provided a vast amount of factual information to help the Committees and this House in their scrutiny. I am confident that we have met the requirements of the motion, while respecting our overriding duty to the national interest.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): If the Government wished to resist the publication of the papers that they had, they should have voted against the motion, and if they wished to qualify or edit the papers that they had, they should have sought to amend the motion. We cannot allow, post Brexit, the reduction of parliamentary sovereignty to a slightly ridiculous level. Will the Minister at least consider the possibility of sharing, at least with the Chairman of the Exiting the European Union Committee, the papers in the original form they were in when we voted on the motion, before this editing process started? The House would then no doubt be guided by the Chairman of the Select Committee on changes and omissions that are legitimately in the national interest and should be made.

Mr Walker: I share my right hon. and learned Friend’s commitment to ensuring that the House can scrutinise valuable information in this respect, but the problem with the motion that was passed is that it referred to sectoral impact analyses. We were clear from the start that the documents it referred to did not exist in the form that was required. We have therefore pulled together sectoral analysis for the scrutiny of the Select Committee. I think that that will prove valuable to the Committee.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): On a day in June 2016, the people of the United Kingdom were asked one question on one day. As a result of the answer they gave to that one question, there is no going back on Brexit. On 1 November, Parliament was asked one question, but for the intervening 27 days the Government have done everything possible to deny and defy the instruction—it was not a request—that they were given by this Parliament, to which, we are told, sovereignty is being restored by the Brexit process.
I remind the Minister that the question of what the Government will provide to the Select Committee is not for the Government or, indeed, for the Select Committee to decide. This Parliament has decided, and there is no discussion, debate or negotiation as to the extent to which that decision will be complied with. It must be complied with in full; otherwise, as the letter published recently by the Chair of the Select Committee on Exiting the European Union makes clear, the Select Committee will have to consider whether to table a motion on contempt. How is that going to look to our European partners? What will it do to the credibility of the Government, and particularly of the Brexit team, if they end up being held in contempt by the Parliament to which they claim to be returning sovereignty?

Will the Minister confirm that the resolution of the House was about not what was made public but what was provided to the Select Committee? In those circumstances, does he not accept that what must be made available to the Select Committee is everything—absolutely everything? If the Government are not prepared to comply with that instruction, they should not be in government. Will he tell us categorically whether he accepts that a decision on what to publish, within the bounds of parliamentary privilege, is for the Select Committee alone, and will he confirm that he and his Government are prepared to trust the judgment of that Committee to exercise on behalf of the House responsible judgment about what the public are entitled to know?

Mr Walker: The hon. Gentleman asks a number of important questions. I would hope to hear some welcome from him for the fact that we have shared the information in these reports with the devolved Administrations. When I gave evidence to Select Committees recently in Scotland, we were pressed on whether we would do that. We do respect the fact that the Select Committee has the complete choice and discretion over what gets published of the information that is shared with it. That is why the Government have published the information to the Select Committee in the way that they have.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): My hon. Friend has every right to ensure—as the EU has given out in its guidance—that not all confidential information is necessarily made available; otherwise, that might restrict our negotiating position. May I also urge him, however, to have that discussion with the Chairman of the Select Committee and ask him specifically what is it he was expecting that he has not got in terms of the documents?

Mr Walker: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question and his urging. I shall certainly take account of both his points.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I welcome the willingness of the Secretary of State to appear before the Select Committee—a decision that we made this morning. May I ask the Minister to convey to him our judgment about what the public are entitled to know?

Mr Walker: I have great respect for the right hon. Gentleman, and I will certainly communicate his message to the Secretary of State. On the point he makes about the information in the analyses, what the motion referred to was not what existed at the time. What we have tried to do is ensure that there is full information available to his Committee. When he has had the chance to scrutinise that and ask questions of Ministers about that, he will find that information very useful to his scrutiny.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): As my hon. Friend has said, there are 850 pages of these documents and so far the Chairman of the Select Committee is the only Member who has actually seen them. I understand that the documents have been sent to two Select Committees of Parliament and to the devolved Administrations. As a former Chairman of a Select Committee, I can say that leaks are not without precedent. I would not want the Government to make available any information that, if it became public, could undermine our negotiating position.

Mr Walker: I thank my right hon. Friend for the point he makes, which is important, but of course we want to ensure that as much information as can be made available to the Select Committee is available within the constraints that I have discussed.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Why, when the Bank of England has published the frankly chilling implications of no deal, do the Government insist on selectively editing the sectoral reports? Is it true, as I was told by a DExEU insider, that what the Government have done is release sensitive documentation, while withholding the bulk of that sensitive information?

Mr Walker: In answer to the right hon. Gentleman’s last question, no.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I find that I agree with the comments of the Father of the House and the Chairman of the Select Committee, but I do understand that there is a dilemma for the Government. One recent motion clearly says that all documents should be delivered. A previous motion in this House says that the Government should not produce anything that damages our negotiations. Those motions are not clear, so would it not be an idea for the Government to come back with another motion clarifying the situation?

Mr Walker: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his suggestion. Of course such suggestions are not necessarily for me to respond to, but it is certainly something that we will have a look at.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): In June, the Secretary of State said on “The Andrew Marr Show” that “We’ve got 50, nearly 60 sector analyses already done.”
In September, that was reiterated in response to my freedom of information request. In October, the Secretary of State confirmed to our Committee and said that the reports were in “excruciating detail” and that the Prime Minister had seen the summaries. In November, we heard that they never existed. On what basis can completed reports be uncompleted, and on what basis is it right that the Government do anything other than give the reports in full to the Select Committee, in line with the resolution of this House?

Mr Walker: The Government have provided the reports covering the 58 sectors to the Select Committee, and I look forward to the Select Committee being able to scrutinise them in detail. The hon. Lady has been persistent in pressing for as much of this information as possible to be put in the public domain. Her Front-Bench team have also been persistent in recognising that that could not be done with all the information, subject to negotiations, without damaging our national interest.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): The issue now is not whether it is in the Government’s interest to publish these documents. If the Government did not want to publish them, they should have voted down or amended the Humble Address. In all precedent, this is a binding motion, unlike the previous motion passed earlier in the year, which was not a Humble Address and not a binding motion. To meet this motion, it is not at the discretion of the Government to decide what to take out; it is at the discretion of the Select Committee. I therefore urge the Government either to meet the terms of the motion in full, or to seek to put down a new motion.

Mr Walker: I take my hon. Friend’s expertise in parliamentary procedure extremely seriously, and I recognise the point that he is making. We do feel that we have responded to the motion in full by preparing for the Select Committee sectoral analyses. The point that I make to him is that the sectoral analyses did not exist in the form that was requested in the motion at the time.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): This situation is entirely of the Government’s making. The motion passed by this House did not give the Government discretion to take this information and decide for themselves what to give to the Select Committee and what not to give to the Select Committee. The Government have not complied with the motion, which they did not resist. There is another underlying point here—apart from questions of parliamentary privilege and contempt—and it is this: do we believe that the public have a right to know the consequences of the options facing the country on Brexit? I believe that they do. Does the Minister agree?

Mr Walker: The right hon. Gentleman knows that we have responded to the motion. We accepted that it was binding. We have therefore brought forward information for the Select Committee. We have gone further than that by bringing forward information for the Lords Committee and for the devolved Administrations, and we are now in discussions to ensure that that information can be provided in confidential reading rooms for the whole House. Of course, what is not in the interests of the public of this country is to publish information to the other side that could be sensitive to our negotiating position; that is what this House has repeatedly voted for us not to do.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Most people would accept that it is perfectly reasonable to exclude commercial market and negotiation-sensitive information but, unfortunately, that was not expressly excluded in the terms of the Humble Address on 1 November. Will my hon. Friend look carefully at the option of the Government bringing forward a revised motion that expressly excludes that information from the material to be supplied to the Select Committee?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend, like many of my hon. Friends, raises an interesting point. It is something that we will look into. What we have done is to ensure that the Select Committee has information on the sectoral analyses that the Government have conducted, which is an important step taken in response to a motion of the House.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): In his letter of 2 November, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), the Chair of the Select Committee, wrote:

“once the material has been provided to the committee, I would be very happy to discuss with you any particular concerns you may have about publication of parts of the material so that the committee can take these into account in making its decision on release.”

On 27 November, the Secretary of State wrote:

“we have received no assurances from the committee regarding how any information passed will be used.”

Does the Minister agree that that letter is a blatant misrepresentation of what was agreed and that the Secretary of State should withdraw that remark and apologise for it to my right hon. Friend?

Mr Walker: No, I do not.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): It is extremely important that we understand exactly what was voted on and what the Select Committee seeks disclosure of. I am reminding myself of the motion, which was in two parts. It first referred to the list of sectoral analyses, and then went on to make it clear that it was “the impact assessments arising from those analyses” that should be provided to the Select Committee.

The hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) referred to the evidence provided by the Secretary of State to the Select Committee back in October. I remind myself of his answers to questions 131 and 132 in that session, in which he made it clear that those impact assessments existed “in excruciating detail” and that the Prime Minister had been provided with a summary, which she had read. Will the Minister confirm that what this House now seeks the Government to disclose are the impact assessments?

Mr Walker: My right hon. Friend is, as always, forensic in her questioning. We were very clear when we were debating this motion that exactly what it referred to was not available at that time. Of course, there are various assessments and documents held by the Government that have been worked on over time, addressing the
individual sectors. We have actually sought to provide the Select Committee with a great deal more information than existed at the time of the Secretary of State’s evidence to it, and I think that that will be valuable to the Committee in its scrutiny.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): The main issues dividing the House at this stage in the Brexit negotiations are our continued membership of the customs union and of the single market. Ministers say constantly that they do not want to reveal anything that could weaken their negotiating hand, but the Government have made their position clear and the European Union has accepted that the Government want a hard Brexit, so why would it damage the Government’s negotiating position to put that information out? Can the Minister confirm that the information in the edited documents will help Members to reach a view on whether we should stay in the customs union and the single market?

Mr Walker: I can confirm to the right hon. Gentleman that the information in the edited documents will be valuable to the House, but it is wrong to describe them as “edited documents”. I would describe them as comprehensive sectoral analyses that the Government have provided for the Select Committee and will be providing, on a confidential basis, to the House.

In response to the right hon. Gentleman’s question about the customs union and the single market, I remind him that he, like I, stood on a manifesto that said that we do not want to reveal anything that could weaken our negotiating hand, but the Government have made their position clear and the European Union has accepted that the Government want a hard Brexit, so why would it damage the Government’s negotiating position to put that information out? Can the Minister confirm that the information in the edited documents will help Members to reach a view on whether we should stay in the customs union and the single market?

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The Minister is making a gallant and courteous defence of a situation that is unlikely to satisfy everybody in this House because of the terms of the Humble Address, but there are two aspects of this that need to be separated. The first is the requirement to provide everything to the Select Committee, which the Humble Address did call for. The second is the fact that surely no one in this House would want our country to go into the negotiating chamber in a weaker position as a result of decisions taken here. The shadow Secretary of State himself recognised that there is a way of dealing with these things, which is to redact what would be sensitive. Unfortunately, the Humble Address did not cover that, so I believe that it is now strongly in the Government’s interest to table a motion to amend the Humble Address, which many of us in the House would strongly support.

Mr Walker: Like many Conservative Members, my hon. Friend has suggested an approach that the Government could take. It is certainly something to which we will give due consideration.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The crucial issue is the Government’s failure to be open and transparent with the public and Parliament about the consequences of their approach to Brexit. They are not just doing that with regard to these papers, because they also refuse to give clear examples of the spending reprioritisation that is taking place in Departments as a result of the assessments in the papers and the Government’s policies on Brexit. Will the Government publish a breakdown of the funding that they are giving each Department to cope with their approach to Brexit?

Mr Walker: The hon. Gentleman’s question strays quite a long way beyond the matter that we are discussing at the moment. We will absolutely continue to engage with Parliament and its Select Committees to support their scrutiny. We will provide them with as much information as we can, consistent with the national interest.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Just to rub it in: who was it who first suggested the use of redaction?

Mr Walker: I can confirm that that was the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer).

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The Minister has mentioned the devolved Administrations on a number of occasions. I am advised by Scottish Government colleagues that the documents they have received contain nothing substantial at all about Scotland. On 24 and 25 October, the Secretary of State for Scotland and the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union gave evidence—to the Scottish Affairs Committee and the Exiting the European Union Committee respectively—that assessments of Brexit’s impact on the Scottish economy existed and would be shared with the Scottish Government. Will the Minister confirm that those unedited documents will now be shared without further delay?

Mr Walker: I can confirm that the documents that are being shared with the Select Committee are also being shared in the usual way, with permanent secretaries of the devolved Administrations, on the same basis as they have been shared with the Select Committee. The sectoral analyses do, in many cases, contain important analyses of Scottish issues.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): May I gently suggest to my hon. Friend, for whom I have the greatest of respect, that there should be a bit of a rethink on this matter before the Secretary of State appears before the Select Committee in the coming days? I also urge my hon. Friend to recognise that the really important thing at this stage is to get a move on with the negotiations and ensure that companies up and down the country, which are currently in limbo, know what we are going to do. We have to move forward in December; we cannot stand still.

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend makes a hugely important point. I think we all want to ensure that we have the most successful approach to the negotiations, that we move forward in December and that we talk about the implementation period, which is hugely important to companies, and the deep and special partnership that we want to form between the UK and the EU. I will certainly take his points on board.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The Brexit Committee has made the rightful assertion that it will decide what information is published, but does the
Minister accept that there is a real danger that the national interest could be put in jeopardy if more weight were given to transparency than to protecting our negotiating position? Does he therefore agree that the best way forward is to seek clarification from the House that it does not wish for information that could be sensitive to be placed in the Committee’s hands, and therefore to bring forward a motion to the House along those lines?

Mr Walker: The hon. Gentleman reinforces a point that has been made by many of my hon. Friends. As I said, we will give that due consideration. He is right that we need to ensure that we protect the absolute national interest in this process by ensuring that information that is sensitive in the negotiations remains confidential.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): In all my hon. Friend’s dealings with his European Union counterparts, has he ever formed the view that they pay no heed to the proceedings of this House and, indeed, have no interest in the contents of any documents that may be produced for any of its Select Committees?

Mr Walker: My right hon. Friend makes an interesting suggestion. I would say that the proceedings of this House—certainly as they are reported by the press—are sometimes of great interest to our continental colleagues, but I do take his point.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The Department has handed over some 850 pages, but the Minister has made it clear that some information has been withheld. If that additional material had also been handed over, how many pages would that have been? Would it be another couple of hundred, more or less, or has the information not actually been compiled?

Mr Walker: Yes, the implication is that I and other members of the House really ought to support. We believe that the Select Committee has a serious job to do. These papers have been produced at great length to help to inform that scrutiny. The issue could be solved next week if the Government were to come back with a sensible motion, which every Member of this House really ought to support.

Mr Walker: As with other hon. Friends, I take my hon. Friend’s suggestion very seriously.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): By not releasing the papers in their original form, is the Minister aware that the implication is that I and other members of the Select Committee cannot be trusted to act in the national interest?

Mr Walker: No, I do not believe that is the case at all. We believe that the Select Committee has a serious job of scrutiny to do. These papers have been produced at great length to help to inform that scrutiny.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I would be rather more interested in seeing the impact assessments drawn up by the EU of the impact of Britain leaving the EU and how that is affecting the EU’s negotiating position. Does my hon. Friend share my curiosity that Opposition Members are not keen to scrutinise those documents?

Mr Speaker: Order. The trouble with the interest of the hon. Gentleman, which is of great fascination to Members of the House and many spectators beyond its environs, is that it is not even adjacent to the question before us, but I am sure the hon. Gentleman can entertain himself in the long winter evenings that lie ahead.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): This is not my definition of taking back control. This huge mess that the Government have got themselves into shows the limits of their clever-clever tactic of not engaging with Opposition motions by sitting on their hands. Despite what the Minister says, the fact is that a Humble Address, which it is compulsory for the Government to act on, has been carried. It calls not for the documents to be edited and not for them to be changed—that job now goes to the Select Committee. The Government have to get on and publish these documents, and they have to publish them now.

Mr Walker: As I made it very clear on the day we debated this issue, the documents did not exist in the form that was requested. We took the motion of the House extremely seriously, and that is why we have made sure that a great deal of information has been provided to the Select Committee.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Has any formal protocol been put down by the Committee and conveyed to Ministers about how it would handle this information, because that is pertinent in all this?

Mr Walker: Not that I am aware of.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): What—[Interruption.] If I could have the Minister’s attention, what guidelines were provided to the officials editing the documents as to what should be excluded?

Mr Walker: I have made it clear to the House that this information was pulled together from a range of documents. As I have also made clear, we have to ensure that commercially sensitive information, and information that would be prejudicial to the national interest, could not be at risk of being published. But this has been a process of ensuring that there is more information for the Committee, not less.

Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con): Does the Minister share my concern about how a letter sent by the Secretary of State to the ExEU Committee managed to reach journalists at the Daily Mirror before it was considered by the Committee? Does that encourage or discourage him when it comes to sharing confidential information?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend raises a very interesting point. Of course, all leaks should be taken extremely seriously.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): The Minister will understand that it is important that the Executive get on with policy, but there is a fundamental role in our constitution for Parliament to hold the Executive to
account and to scrutinise this hugely important decision. The Secretary of State said that the information existed “in excruciating detail” and that the Prime Minister had seen the summaries. For that reason, it is hard to understand why we cannot see the entirety of the information—if so, with redaction. Can the Minister explain why that is not the case?

Mr Walker: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about the balance we need to strike. We do need to get on with this role, but we also absolutely respect the role of parliamentary scrutiny in this process, which is why the information that has been provided to the Committee is comprehensive and in great detail. It goes beyond the type of summaries that he refers to and, indeed, that the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras suggested might be an answer to this. We have actually provided much more information than just summarising reports could have done.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order.

Points of Order

1.13 pm

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Further to the debates we have just had, it is clear there is a lot of concern from Members on both sides of the House that the Government have not satisfied the motion passed less than a month ago. You have been very clear in your advice that the motion passed was binding. After the debate on 1 November, you said that “I would expect the Vice-Chamberlain of the Household to present the Humble Address in the usual way.”—[Official Report, 1 November 2017; Vol. 630, c. 931.]

The expectation of this House was that the papers would be handed over in full, unedited. Anything less than this would be, I believe, a contempt of Parliament. Can I seek your guidance on whether you believe the Government have adequately satisfied the motion and the expectations of the House? If not, would failure to comply be considered a contempt of the House? If so, what would be the best way for Members to proceed?

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Is it very specifically further to, and therefore on the point raised by, the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer)?

Pete Wishart indicated assent.

Mr Speaker: It is. Point of order, Mr Pete Wishart.

Pete Wishart: As you will know, Mr Speaker, I wrote to you on 7 November asking you to consider contempt proceedings against the Government for failing to provide these Brexit analysis papers in full, as mandated, as you said, by the fully binding motion agreed by the House. You very generously gave the Government three weeks to comply, and you said you were awaiting the outcome of the conversations between the Secretary of State and the Chairman of the Exiting the European Union Committee. We have now had those conversations, and we have now heard the response from the Chairman of the Committee, who stated in this very Chamber just a few moments ago that the Government do not meet the motion in full. I therefore ask you to reconsider my letter of 7 November and to consider bringing contempt motions, as detailed on page 273 of “Erskine May”. I am sure you are aware of the significance of this, and I know you will deal with this sensitively. This is contempt, and the Government must be held accountable for their failure to comply.

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer).

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Order. I will come to the hon. Gentleman in due course, potentially.

Mr Fysh: It is on this matter.

Mr Speaker: Very well. Let us hear Mr Marcus Fysh.
Mr Fysh: On page 201 of “Erskine May”, the section on ministerial accountability quotes from a resolution that was passed by both Houses of Parliament in the 1996-97 Session, which makes it clear that Ministers do not have to disclose all information if it is not in the public interest to do so. Does that have any bearing on this?

Mr Speaker: I am extraordinarily grateful to the hon. Gentleman, and I say this in no spirit of discourtesy to him, but I am familiar with precedent in relation to these matters, and I did not particularly need to be advised of the presence of that material in “Erskine May”. He will not be surprised to know that I have attended to these matters recently and regularly.

What I would say in response to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Peter Wishart) very specifically is that I can, of course, reconsider his letter, but I hope he will not mind my saying that I think it would be more orderly and courteous if he were to write to me again, if he is so minded, in the light of the developments that have ensued since his earlier letter. This is not being pedantic; it really is not. It is a question of procedural propriety. I receive a letter from the hon. Gentleman, I will consider it and respond in a timely way.

Beyond that, what I want at this point to say is that I think it is well known to Members, and certainly to such legal luminaries as the former Director of Public Prosecutions, that a Member wishing to allege a contempt should, in the first instance, raise it not in a point of order, nor indeed in the media, but by writing to me as soon as practicable after the Member has notice of the alleged contempt or breach of privilege. I then decide whether or not the matter should have precedence. It is certainly also well known to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire that this is the procedure, as he availed himself of it a few weeks ago. I am more than happy to confirm that my doors are always open for such written notices.

Beyond that formal statement, and in the hope that this is helpful to Members in all parts of the House, I would emphasise that we all heard what the Chair of the Brexit Select Committee had to say. He indicated that the Committee had made a public statement and requested an urgent audience with the Secretary of State, and that information from the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) was extremely important. The Minister responded, indicating a willingness on the part of the Secretary of State to meet, and to do so as soon as practicable after the Member has notice of the alleged contempt or breach of privilege. I then decide whether or not the matter should have precedence. It is certainly also well known to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire that this is the procedure, as he availed himself of it a few weeks ago. I am more than happy to confirm that my doors are always open for such written notices.

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being able to receive a highly sensitive document on their own, in private, and deal with it sensibly and in a public-spirited way? There is a long tradition of that, particularly in very sensitive inquiries concerning children and education. Why that cannot apply at some stage in this case, I do not know.

Mr Speaker: That is a very helpful piece of information from an extremely experienced former Select Committee Chair. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman; the House will have heard what he had to say.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You are very generous; you did say “finally”, but I delayed, because this is related to what has gone on but is not on quite the same subject. One Member said, very pertinently, that this all arises from the curious practice, which started in this Parliament, of the Government not voting on Opposition motions, which has never happened in the history of the House, I think. The result is that the proceedings of the House are becoming littered with motions that are extremely critical of the Government and their policies, the vast majority of which motions I do not agree with. That reduces this House to a debating Chamber, and raises the question: what is parliamentary accountability in modern times? Could you perhaps initiate discussions with the usual channels to see how we can get back to the constitutional position that we should undoubtedly have, in which the Government are accountable for all their actions and policies to this House of Commons, and cannot simply ignore motions as though they were the resolutions of some local tea party?

Mr Speaker: I am not sure how grateful I am to the right hon. and learned Gentleman for his point of order, but my response is twofold. First, the Address is just that—the Address—whether an attempt was made to amend it or not, and its binding quality is just that. Irrespective of whether that attempt was made or not, it stands anyway. Secondly, how the Government deal with Opposition day debate motions is a matter for the Government. What the Government have done to date is not disorderly. If the right hon. and learned Gentleman has suggested, as I think he has, that at the very least it has not been helpful to the House, I certainly would not dissent from that. It would be helpful if people reflected on the wider implications or ramifications of their conduct on individual occasions. He has served in this House without interruption for 47 years, five months and 10 days, and I think he knows of what he speaks.

If there are no further points of order, I thank colleagues; that will do for now. We come now to the statement by the Secretary of State for Health, for which he has been most patiently waiting.
Maternity Safety Strategy

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Maternity Safety Strategy

at which the incident happened, but independently, with a thorough, learning-focused investigation conducted by the healthcare safety investigation branch. That new body started up this year, drawing on the approach taken to investigations in the airline industry, and it has successfully reduced fatalities with thorough, independent investigations, the lessons of which are rapidly disseminated around the whole system.

The new independent maternity safety investigations will involve families from the outset, and they will have an explicit remit not just to get to the bottom of what happened in an individual instance, but to spread knowledge around the system so that mistakes are not repeated. The first investigations will happen in April next year and they will be rolled out nationally throughout the year, meaning that we will have complied with recommendation 23 of the Kirkup report into Morecambe Bay.

Secondly, following concerns that some neonatal deaths are being wrongly classified as stillbirths, which means that a coroner’s inquest cannot take place, I will work with the Ministry of Justice to look closely into enabling, for the first time, full-term stillbirths to be covered by coronial law, giving due consideration to the impact on the devolved Administration in Wales. I would like to thank my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) for his campaigning on this issue.

Next, we will do more to improve the training of maternity staff in best practice. Today, we are launching the Atain e-learning programme for healthcare professionals involved in the care of newborns to improve care for babies, mothers and families. The Atain programme works to reduce avoidable causes of harm that can lead to infants born at term being admitted to a neonatal unit. We will also increase training for consultants on the care of pregnant women with significant health conditions such as cardiovascular disease.

We know that smoking during pregnancy is closely correlated with neonatal harm. Our tobacco control plan commits the Government to reducing the prevalence of smoking in pregnancy from 10.7% to 6% or less by 2022. Today, we will provide new funding to train health practitioners, such as maternity support workers, to deliver evidence-based smoking cessation according to appropriate national standards.

The 1,000 new investigations into “Each Baby Counts” cases will help us to transform what can be a blame culture into the learning culture that is required, but one of the current barriers to learning is litigation. Earlier this year, I consulted on the rapid resolution and redress scheme, which offers families with brain-damaged children better access to support and compensation as an alternative to the court system. My intention is that in incidents of possibly avoidable serious brain injury at birth, successfully establishing the new independent HSIB investigations will be an important step on the road to introducing a full rapid resolution and redress scheme, to reduce delays in delivering support and compensation for families. Today, I am publishing a summary of responses to the consultation, which reflect strong support for the key aims of the scheme: to improve safety, to improve patients’ experience and to improve cost-effectiveness. I will look to launch the scheme, ideally, from 2019.

Finally, a word about the costs involved. NHS Resolution spent almost £500 million settling obstetric claims in 2016-17. For every £1 the NHS spends on delivering a baby, another 60p is spent by another part of the NHS on settling claims related to previous births. Trusts that improve their maternity safety are also saving the NHS money, allowing more funding to be made available for frontline care. To create a strong financial incentive to improve maternity safety, we will increase by 10% the maternity premium paid by every trust under the clinical negligence scheme for trusts, but we will refund the increase, possibly with an even greater discount, if a trust can demonstrate compliance with 10 criteria identified as best practice on maternity safety.

Taken together, these measures give me confidence that we can bring forward the date by which we achieve a halving of neonatal deaths, maternal deaths, injuries and stillbirths from 2030—the original planned date—to 2025. I am today setting that as the new target date for the “halve it” ambition. Our commitment to reduce the rate by 20% by 2020 remains and, following powerful representations made by voluntary sector organisations, I will also include in that ambition a reduction in the national rate of pre-term births from 8% to 6%. In particular, we need to build on the good evidence that women who have “continuity of carer” throughout their pregnancy are less likely to experience a pre-term delivery, with safer outcomes for themselves and their babies.

I would not be standing here today making this statement were it not for the campaigning of numerous parents who have been through the agony of losing a treasured child. Instead of moving on and trying to draw a line under their tragedy, they have chosen to relive it over and again. I have often mentioned members of the public such as James Titcombe and Carl Hendrickson, to whom I again pay tribute. But I also want to mention members of this House who have bravely spoken out about their own experiences, including my hon. Friends the Members for Colchester (Will Quince), for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) and for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), as well as the hon. Members for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft), for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) and for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson). Their passionate hope—and ours, as we stand shoulder to shoulder with them—is that drawing attention to what may have gone wrong in their own case will help to ensure that mistakes are not repeated and others are spared the terrible heartache that they and their families endured. We owe it to each and every one of them to make this new strategy work. I commend this statement to the House.

1.38 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for the advance copy of his statement. At the outset, may I pay tribute, as he has done, to the hon. Members who have spoken out so movingly in recent months about baby loss? They include, as he has said, the hon. Members for Colchester (Will Quince), for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach), for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) and for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), and my hon. Friends the Members for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) and for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson). They are all a credit to the House.
Our national health service offers some of the best neonatal care in the world, and the progress set out by the Secretary of State today is a tribute to the extraordinary work of midwives and maternity staff across the country. We welcome his announcement that all notifiable cases of stillbirth and neonatal death in England will now receive an independent investigation by the healthcare safety investigation branch. That is an important step, which will help to bring certainty and closure to hundreds of families every year.

We also welcome the move by the Secretary of State to allow coroners to investigate stillbirths. May I assure him that the Opposition stand ready to work constructively with him to ensure the smooth and timely passage of the relevant legislation, should he and the Government choose to bring any before the House? I also pay tribute to the work carried out by the team at the University of Leicester that leads on the perinatal aspects of the maternal, newborn and infant clinical outcome review programme, which provided the evidence for today’s announcement.

The number of deaths during childbirth has halved since 1993, saving about 220 lives a year, but we welcome the Secretary of State’s ambition to bring forward to 2025 the target date for halving the rate of stillbirths, neonatal deaths, maternal deaths and brain injuries that occur during or soon after birth. If that target is to be delivered, however, it is essential that NHS units providing neonatal care occur during or soon after birth. If that target is to be achieved. We have about 1,700 neonatal deaths every year—that has actually fallen by 10% since 2010—but behind that figure, there is variation across the country.

For example, our best trust has about three deaths in 1,000, but in other trusts the figure can be 10 in 1,000, which is more than three times as many neonatal deaths. That shows we are not as good as we need to be at spreading best practice. Today’s announcement is really about ensuring that we can confidently look every expecting mum in the eye and say, “You are getting the very highest standards of care that we are able to deliver in the NHS.”

I thank the hon. Gentleman for his offer to co-operate on any legislation needed to expand the scope of inquests to full-term stillbirths, and we will get back to him on that. I also thank him for raising the issue of bereavement services. I spoke to a bereavement midwife this morning, and I think bereavement midwives are among the most extraordinary people working in the whole NHS. We do have a programme to improve the consistency of bereavement services and to roll out the use of bereavement suites across the NHS; our best trusts have such suites, but by no means all of them do.

The hon. Gentleman was absolutely correct to raise the issues of both funding and staffing. We have seen an increase of 1,600 in the number of midwives since 2010, which is a rise of 8%, and an increase of 600 in the number of obstetricians and doctors working in maternity departments, which is a rise of about 13%, but we need more. There are lots of pressures across the NHS, and we also have to fund the extra midwives and doctors that we need. There was a welcome boost for the NHS in the Budget, with an extra £1.6 billion available for the NHS next year. However, looking forward to the next 10 years and all the pressures coming down the track for the NHS—with a growing birth rate, but also with an ageing population—I do not pretend that we will not have to revisit the issue of NHS funding and find a long-term approach. Probably the most appropriate time to do that will be when we come to the end of the five year forward view and start to think about what happens following that. If we are to put more money into the NHS, we need to have the doctors, midwives and nurses to spend that money on, which is why, in the past year, the Government have committed to a 25% increase in the number of nurse training places and a 25% increase in the number of medical school training places.

My final point for the hon. Gentleman is that, although we have lots of debates in this House in which we take different positions in relation to the NHS, one thing we
can be united on is our aspiration, which is shared across the House, that the NHS should be the safest healthcare system in the world, and I very much thank him for his support on that.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. This is an extremely important and sensitive matter, and we appreciate the statement on it. However, the business to follow—the final day of debate on the Budget—is also extremely important, and no fewer than 67 right hon. and hon. Members have indicated a wish to speak. Exceptionally, therefore, I may not feel able to call everybody on this statement. In any event, there is a premium on brevity from Back Benchers and Front Benchers alike.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I warmly welcome the Secretary of State’s announcements today, including the move to allow coroners to investigate full-term stillbirths. Will he set out the current waiting time for post-mortems for infants because, as he will be aware, there is a shortage of the very highly specialised pathologists who carry out this vital work?

Mr Hunt: I do not have that information to hand, but I will find out for my hon. Friend and let her know.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Last month’s debate on baby loss has been mentioned, and I too took part in it, although I have thankfully been spared the pain suffered by some Members of the House. Such a debate really helps to bring out for everyone on both sides of the House how important this issue is, and I do not think there will be anyone who does not welcome this statement and the ambition it shows.

In Scotland, we had a higher stillbirth, neonatal and perinatal death rate in 2012, but our new chief medical officer was actually an obstetrician, and that may have led to the change of focus in 2013, when she established the maternity and children quality improvement collaborative and the national stillbirth group—all as part of the Scottish patient safety initiative—as well as the neonatal managed clinical networks across Scotland. That has enabled us to drop our stillbirth rate by more than a quarter, and to drop our neonatal death rate by 50%.

This has been achieved despite the challenges we face of really difficult geography, including getting people off islands. It is easy to spot the woman who has a history of difficult births or to spot a woman with comorbidities, such as obesity or diabetes, but anyone who has been involved in birth knows that even the healthiest pregnancy can go wrong at the last minute. For us, as in rural parts of the north and west of England, there are transport issues in relation to how women with problems during labour are identified and transported if a higher specialism is required, and those issues must be looked at.

This is very much about the provision of neonatal services, including the movement of patients, and the availability of expertise and of neonatal intensive care units. However, as came out several times during the debate on baby loss, another issue is that of pre-term birth and stillbirth, so this is also about trying to change some of those things. After Scotland’s recent review in February, the focus will be on the consistent monitoring of growth, as a failure to thrive can identify a third of impending stillbirths; the continuity of care, which the Secretary of State has referenced; and especially smoking. Although the Secretary of State mentioned getting smoking rates down—and in Scotland, sadly, they are higher—the rate in the most deprived communities is more than four times that in the least deprived communities. That has an impact on every level of child loss.

Finally, on research, it is important that we learn, for example from the new information about women sleeping on their side in the last trimester. We need to fund the research to learn those things and then share the information—

Mr Speaker: Order. I have the highest regard for the hon. Lady, who is a considerable medical authority. I gave her a little leeway, but I say very gently that not only did she exceed her time by a minute, but she pursued her usual, rather discursive approach. In these situations, what is required is a question or a series of questions with a question mark or a series of question marks, rather than general analysis. We will leave it there for now. I say that in the most good-natured spirit to the hon. Lady.

I call Antoinette Sandbach.

Mr Hunt rose—

Mr Speaker: I forgive that we had heard from the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), but we had not yet heard from the Secretary of State. Apologies.

Mr Hunt: I actually agreed with everything the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire said. I will give a rather more brief response.

Mr Speaker: Order. As I have just been advised by the distinguished Clerk at the Table, who swivelled round so to advise me, there is really no need for a response, because there was no question. However, I will indulge the right hon. Gentleman to the point of a paragraph.

Mr Hunt: Let me simply say that there is an excellent Scottish patient safety programme. Given that one of the main objectives behind the statement is to share best practice, I would be very happy to talk to the chief medical officer in Scotland and to Jason Leitch about how we can exchange information and learn from each other’s systems.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): As every parent who has lost a child knows, what they want most is answers. I therefore congratulate the Secretary of State on bringing forward the healthcare safety investigation branch, because such independence will be crucial in gaining the buy-in of parents and in their knowing what has happened in their particular case. How will the learning from those investigations be shared?

Mr Hunt: I thank my hon. Friend for her extraordinary campaigning on this issue. Yes, we want parents to get the answer more quickly, but we also want to be able to answer the question that every parent asks: “Can you guarantee that this won’t happen again?” The investigators
[Mr Hunt]

will have an explicit dual remit: to get to the bottom of what happened, but also to spread that message around the system so that the same mistake is not repeated. That is the objective of setting up a new team of people to do this.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): My constituents Jack and Sarah Hawkins have spoken bravely about the tragic death of their daughter Harriet due to failures of care. Members may have heard them this morning. I spoke to Jack earlier and am pleased to tell the Secretary of State that they feel listened to and heard. They and I very much welcome his statement and his support for extending the power of coroners. However, Jack and Sarah need to be able to stop fighting and to begin healing, so I ask the Secretary of State to urge his colleagues at the Ministry of Justice to support the Bill introduced by the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) to bring about that change as soon as possible.

Mr Hunt: Through the hon. Lady, I express my thanks to Jack and Sarah for bravely telling their story this morning in the media, which was incredibly moving and touched a lot of hearts. With respect to allowing inquests into full-term stillbirths, our objective is to move as quickly as any legislative vehicle allows. If I am able to work closely with my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) to do that, that is exactly what I want to do.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): I very much welcome the Secretary of State’s statement and congratulate him on it. Does he agree that the vast majority of grieving parents, if not all, not only want to know why, but want to know that their child’s life, however short, will have had meaning by ensuring that we learn lessons from them not as a statistic, but as a baby? That is why the independent investigation unit is so important. We must learn the lessons not just in one trust, but across the whole NHS and spread that learning to ensure that as many people as possible go through this emotional personal tragedy.

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As he knows, because he has spoken so movingly on this subject many times, there is absolutely nothing we can do to make up for the searing loss of losing a loved one—a baby. It is the worst thing any parent can go through. We can at least give them the commitment that we will learn. If we are honest, we do not do so at the moment, because we sometimes wait 10 years for a court case to be settled, and even then it is not always clear to me that the lessons of what happened are properly learned around the system. This statement is an attempt to change that.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I very much welcome the Secretary of State’s approach to more openness and transparency in the NHS around baby deaths. However, he will remember signing a letter in May 2016, along with the then Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government and the then Secretary of State for Justice, on an independent inquiry into the baby ashes scandal in Hull. That inquiry has never happened and parents still do not have the answers about what happened in the NHS and Hull City Council in respect of their babies’ ashes. Will the Secretary of State recommit to that independent inquiry going ahead with his permission?

Mr Hunt: I am happy to recommit to that. I apologise to the hon. Lady and her constituents for the delay. I will look into what happened right away.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): The hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) pre-empted my question about my Bill and coroners. I make the offer to sit down with the Secretary of State and his draftsman to decide on the wording of my private Member’s Bill, which will be debated on 2 February, as the fastest way to achieve his goals and get the solution that all Members of the House want.

Mr Hunt: I am happy to do that and am most grateful for that very generous offer.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I am sure that the Secretary of State will realise that, even after all these years, when my wife and I hear news like what we heard this morning, it takes us back to our first baby daughter, who died at birth. After that, we had four healthy children and 10 grandchildren, but we still go back to that awful time. Our baby was sickly; it was not about poor care. We care very much about people who lose their children. As a constituency Member of Parliament, I am getting increasingly worried about rationalisations in which maternity units get further and further away from where the main population live. I also get very worried when we do not give our midwives and doctors our full support to give them the morale to do that difficult job.

Mr Hunt: We must give doctors, nurses and midwives our full support, because they do an extraordinary job. Sometimes there are difficult issues and the centralisation of certain maternity services can improve patient safety if it means that there is round-the-clock consultant cover and so on. In my experience, the most important thing is to spot the most risky births early in the process. I am not a doctor, but there is sometimes an assumption that it is all about what happens at the moment of labour when women go into hospital. Actually, a lot of this is about thinking earlier in the process about higher risk mums—mums who smoke and mums from lower socioeconomic backgrounds—and intervening earlier. That will be important for the hon. Gentleman’s constituents and for mine.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Pregnancy and childbirth are a time of joy for most families, but during my professional career, I sadly had to look after a number of babies who died. I therefore welcome the Secretary of State’s commitment to halving the number of neonatal deaths by 2025. In my professional experience, many babies who are stillborn were already dead or in serious trouble inside the mother before they arrived at hospital. Will the Secretary of State therefore confirm that the investigations will look at pre-hospital care, as well as hospital care, including things such as the measurement of babies’ growth? Will he also encourage expectant mothers to monitor foetal movements, as we know that a reduction in those can be a sign of distress?
Mr Hunt: I can absolutely confirm that. This follows a very interesting discussion on that topic we both had at lunch. My hon. Friend is right that the key is early intervention. Also, we know that continuity of care makes a very big difference. If, well ahead of labour, people can meet the midwives who will be delivering their child, that can help reassure people and lead to safer births.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): This is a very welcome statement. The Secretary of State will know of the very disturbing cases over the past few years in the Pennine health trust. Will he make space within the legislation for retrospective investigations where there have been a number of cases, as in the Pennine trust?

Mr Hunt: I will look into that very carefully. I am satisfied that there is strong new leadership at the Pennine trust and that it is being turned around, but it has told me about some of the cases to which the hon. Gentleman refers. They are of very great concern, and we absolutely must do everything we can to give answers to bereaved families.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): As a bereaved parent, but also as a lawyer who has conducted many inquests, I ask the Secretary of State to consider two points. The first is the fact that not many families will need an inquest to determine what went wrong during the birth of their child. Secondly, will he commit to the training of special coroners, just as we have in military inquests, to ensure that those who deal with these very sad cases are the best equipped people to do so? Finally, on behalf of the all-party group on baby loss, may I thank him for today’s announcement and encourage him in his work to make maternity care kinder, safer and closer to home—and may I encourage him to save Horton General Hospital?

Mr Hunt: First, may I apologise to my hon. Friend. Friend, because I should have mentioned her in my statement as someone who has spoken very passionately and movingly on this topic in the House? I will take away her point about specialist coroners, because we are now going to have specialist investigators, which we have never had before. I would make one other point. I hope she does not think I am doing down her former profession, but really when people go to the law, we have failed. If we get this right—if we can be more open, honest and transparent with families earlier on—it will, I hope, mean many fewer legal cases, although I am sure that the lawyers will always find work elsewhere.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement, like many others in the Chamber. He talked several times about learning lessons. As he knows, a recent report has highlighted that in my own trust, the East Sussex Healthcare NHS Trust, there were 19 stillbirths last year, which is a far higher percentage than in the rest of the UK. In the spirit of learning lessons, will he agree to someone in the Department of Health examining why that is the case?

Mr Hunt: I absolutely undertake to look into that case and ensure a proper investigation into what is happening. The hon. Gentleman is right; in the end, we need to be much more open about this data, so I commend the trust for sharing the data publicly. Until we access such data, we will not know where the issues are that we need to solve.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): With this vital new focus on safer births, will there be an opportunity to look at group B strep and other issues that if undetected in the later stages of pregnancy can result in baby loss?

Mr Hunt: I am very happy to undertake to do that.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State’s announcement, but will he reconfirm the advice from NICE that midwife-led birthing centres are safe under the appropriate circumstances? In areas such as Rochdale, where the birth rate has shot up dramatically following the closure of its maternity unit, the provision of something like a midwife-led centre would be the right approach.

Mr Hunt: I can absolutely confirm that for low-risk births that is the case, but it is also key to spot the births that are not low-risk, so that alternative provision can be made.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Will the Secretary of State do everything possible to spread across the country the excellent “dads to be” courses that are part of the antenatal provision at Chelsea and Westminster and Kingston Hospitals? We know that they help solidify relationships between parents at a moment of strain and reduce family breakdown.

Mr Hunt: I am intrigued to hear that, because my three children were born at the Chelsea and Westminster, and my wife would have been delighted if I had done a “dads to be” course. I will certainly look into that course and, I am sure, actively promote it.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): May I concur with my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) and say that, although safety must be paramount, it would be wrong to see this as a reason to shut midwife-led units and, in particular, discourage home births for women likely to have a safe birth who chose to have the baby at home? Will the Secretary of State say something to make sure that those units are safe?

Mr Hunt: I am very happy to do that. Midwife-led units and home birthing are both part of the NHS maternity offer, but it is wrong to suggest that there is a conflict between patient safety and the choice made by mothers. No mother would ever actively make a choice to do something that was not the safest option for her and her child.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I welcome the statement, and I am glad that the Secretary of State mentioned the role of tobacco. Has he also considered the role of alcohol?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that. The evidence is very clear about the damage done to foetuses and babies if there is too much—or, indeed, any—drinking by a mother. I did not mention it in the statement because we are focusing on smoking cessation training, but he is right to mention the issue.
John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): The brand new maternity unit at Furness General Hospital will open shortly, thanks to the campaigning of the whole community, but it will be safer thanks to the Secretary of State's personal commitment, thanks to the staff and thanks to the parents of Eleanor Bennett, Alex Brady, Chester Hendrickson, Joshua Titcombe and others who have campaigned tirelessly for local and national change. Will he join my calls for their struggle to be permanently commemorated within the new unit?

Mr Hunt: I am happy to do that. I think I have met most of those parents. The hon. Gentleman has been incredibly supportive to them locally—they have told me that. When Carl Hendrickson came to see me, he brought his 11-year-old son, and I offered for the son to wait outside, but he said no—he wanted his son to be with him. I think it was because he wanted his son to know that he had been to the top to try to understand why his child and his wife died because of mistakes in that maternity unit. The hospital has done an incredible turnaround job—we are all really proud of what it has done—and we are confident that it would not happen again, but that is not to say that there is not a huge amount more we all need to do.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's remarks and the overall tenor of the comments made so far. Does he agree that the most important thing for families who experience tragedy in childbirth is to receive the straight answers they deserve and to know that lessons will be learned where necessary?

Mr Hunt: I do agree. I have visited the hon. Gentleman's trust in Torbay and have been very impressed with the learning I saw from the Sam Morrish case, which was a very sad story of where that did not happen initially. However, as I say, I think the trust has learned all those lessons extremely impressively.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and personal commitment. It is much appreciated. Will he confirm that part of the safety strategy includes ensuring that midwives on labour wards can take their breaks and rest periods and that midwife staffing levels on labour wards and post-section wards are checked, monitored and increased?

Mr Hunt: I agree that that is extremely important. I also extend through the hon. Gentleman a similar offer to the one I made to the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), who speaks for the SNP: I am happy to pursue any collaboration possible between the Northern Irish and English healthcare systems to share best practice.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I welcome the measures that the Secretary of State has announced today and commend him and other colleagues for their sympathetic work. Without them, we would not be here today. I also want to mention Musgrove Park Hospital in my constituency, which is already demonstrating how much good work can be done. It has cut the number of stillbirths by a third in 18 months and has won awards for it. It has introduced a special app that people can use when they are on maternity leave, and it has introduced much-improved special sepsis management. It also has a ground-breaking maternity apprenticeship scheme.

Does the Secretary of State agree that sharing such best practice is the best way to ensure that everyone else can do some great work and that we do not have to hear about these terrible examples again?

Mr Hunt: I really enjoyed visiting Musgrove Park hospital on Friday. I thought that what it was doing about stillbirths was incredibly impressive: I had not seen anything like it before. That is, indeed, an example of fantastic practice that I would like to spread everywhere.
Point of Order

2.10 pm

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Earlier today, during Treasury questions, the Scottish National party's transport spokesperson, the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), said that “the rail funding formula has been ignored and Scotland’s rail budget has been cut by £600 million over the next investment period”. That is not true. Investment in Scotland’s railway has risen from £3 billion to £3.6 billion, as confirmed by the Treasury and Her Majesty’s Government. What steps can be taken to rectify the record and ensure that the SNP spokesman gives the correct facts?

Mr Speaker: I hope that the hon. Gentleman notified the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun of his intention to raise the point of order.

Luke Graham: I am sorry, Mr Speaker. I did not.

Mr Speaker: It is very much the expected practice, and it is normal, for a Member who is going to raise a point of order containing a criticism of another Member to notify that Member of the intention in advance. However, I will treat of what the hon. Gentleman has put to me. The matter concerned is a matter of debate, and the hon. Gentleman has put forward his understanding of the position very clearly. It is on the record, and it may well be the subject of further debate and even, conceivably, of publicity, not least in the Scottish media. We await that prospect with interest and anticipation.

Child Maintenance (Assessment of Parents’ Income)

2.12 pm

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I beg to move, That leave be given to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

2.12 pm

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I beg to move, That leave be given to bring in a Bill to equalise the assessment and enforcement of child maintenance arrangements of children of self-employed parents with those of children of other employed parents; and for connected purposes.

In introducing the Bill, I am following in the steps of David Burrowes, who, until the recent general election, was the Member of Parliament for Enfield Southgate. Let me explain the Bill’s purpose in plain language.

One of the greatest privileges in my role as a Member of Parliament has been meeting and getting to know four brave mums in my constituency. I call Melissa, Sue, Kate, and Jo-Anne my super-mums. As well as being fabulous women and wonderful mothers, they all have one thing in common: having split up from the fathers of their children, they have all had to fight, and are still fighting, for fair maintenance payments. The aim of the Bill is to ensure that the parents and children who find it hardest to be awarded a fair child maintenance arrangement are better supported by a system with proper teeth. Whether paying parents have complex finances, are hiding behind self-employed status, or are simply determined not to pay maintenance, this Bill is for them.

When parents split up, the Child Maintenance Service can help them to work out a fair payment schedule for their children. When the split is amicable and sensible, the system works well, but if paying parents want to avoid paying, they can do so all too easily—and all too often—by hiding behind self-employed status. By hiding their income, they are not only denying their children the financial support that they deserve, but defrauding Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, and, in many cases, forcing the parents with care on to benefits. That is a double hit to the taxpayer. The country loses out on tax, and instead pays out to support the receiving parents. The purpose of the Bill is to ensure that the statutory child maintenance system works for as many families as possible by closing that loophole.

The Child Maintenance Service, which was introduced recently by the Department for Work and Pensions, replaced the old Child Support Agency. In straightforward cases involving a traditionally employed paying parent, it works well. A standard child maintenance calculation under the CMS is based on HMRC’s “gross taxable income” data. That usually means gross earnings from employment or self-employment, with pension contributions deducted. However, the system does not work when the paying parent takes income in other ways—unearned income from, for instance, trusts, dividends, rental income, individual savings accounts, assets, or capital gains from property sales; essentially, any income that does not show up on HMRC records.

I suspect that you are starting to get my drift, Mr Speaker. If it is not shown on HMRC’s records, it is not seen by the CMS. The current system does not work if paying parents are evading tax and not declaring their income to HMRC. In such cases, the amount of child maintenance that the CMS deems a paying parent to owe may be
negligible. Receiving parents may be struggling to make ends meet while seeing their exes buy new cars, take holidays and lead luxurious lives with new families. The mum who brought the issue to David Burrowes’s attention was Elizabeth Green. In her case, her ex had organised his finances in such a way as to pay the minimum statutory sum—just £7 a week—but was found to be a multimillionaire and the owner of multiple properties. My super-mums have had similar experiences.

The old CSA system had a component entitled “lifestyle incompatible with earnings”, which allowed the CSA to challenge income if there was evidence of a more comfortable lifestyle than the declared income suggested. I do not understand why, but that feature has been removed in the new CMS system. The right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), who is one of the Members who have kindly added their names to my Bill, told me recently about a constituent whose application for tax credits had been called into question by HMRC because it believed that her standard of living was too high for her to qualify. That ably demonstrates that HMRC has the capability to question income and allege fraud. It must therefore be able to extend that power to ensure that appropriate child support payments are made.

This simply cannot be right. I do not seek to demonise the self-employed or the wealthy—most parents living apart from their children do pay what they owe—but as the Government rightly turn their attention to the growth in self-employment and the new challenges that that brings in terms of systems, law and taxation, and as they also crack down on tax evasion, now is surely the time for the Child Maintenance Service’s rules of engagement and enforcement powers to change.

The Work and Pensions Committee, of which I am a member, has already looked into this issue. Much of what we found highlighted the challenges associated with the growth of self-employment and the potential that it creates to hide true earnings. As child maintenance evasion often goes hand in hand with tax evasion, it seems inefficient and ineffective not to combine forces with HMRC in a proactive way. The Government must surely consider that—especially given that the CMS’s financial investigations unit has so far conducted only four investigations, just two of which have resulted in action.

This is not a difficult concept to grasp. Parents can see with their own eyes when their exes are living beyond their declared income or assets. For example, a constituent of mine paid just a few pounds to access a public search facility at Companies House that showed as clear as day that the father had drastically under-declared his income through creative company and dividend manoeuvring.

We must act on this exploitable flaw in the system, or instead allow parents to take their cases to the family courts. My super-mums have all trodden that path, only to find that the CMS is not obliged to uphold the courts’ judgments. I know that the Government are serious about tax evasion, so the current loophole in the CMS process makes absolutely no sense. The CMS must either join up with HMRC, or let the courts do their job: it must be one or the other.

In response to our Committee, the Government have said that they will consider how they can include all sources of income in the CMS calculation. That sounds encouraging, but, in the absence of the promised new arrears and compliance strategy, the Bill can be the vehicle to effect the changes that are so desperately needed by introducing measures to help struggling parents and children to secure the maintenance that they deserve. Child maintenance lifts a fifth of single parents on the lowest incomes out of poverty. It provides a lifeline for parents and children, whether that means putting a roof over their heads, covering childcare costs, or enabling children to take part in school trips. It also saves taxpayers’ money.

A child maintenance system with teeth will also offer protection to parents and children when there has been a history of abuse and control. Some cases are high-conflict, involving parents who are determined to avoid their liabilities. That can be a means of continuing to exert control, just as they used to when the parents were still together. Coercion, domestic abuse and ongoing manipulation are the backdrop for the most vulnerable parents who turn to the CMS, and in those cases the state must step in. The fixes are obvious, and dovetail comfortably with the Government’s determination to crack down on tax evasion, while also getting a handle on our rapidly growing self-employed economy.

I urge Members to allow the Bill to be read a second time.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Heidi Allen, Antoinette Sandbach, Mr Ranil Jayawardena, Stephen McPartland, Suelia Fernandes, Frank Field, Layla Moran, Neil Gray, Kit Malthouse, Mrs Cheryl Gillan, Kevin Hollinrake and Mr Steve Reed present the Bill.

Heidi Allen accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the first time: to be read a second time on Friday 23 February 2018, and to be printed (Bill 133).
Ways and Means

Budget Resolutions

INCOME TAX (CHARGE)
Debate resumed (Order, 27 November).
Question again proposed.
That income tax is charged for the tax year 2018-19.
And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

Mr Speaker: I inform the House that I have not selected amendment (a).

2.20 pm

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): It is a great pleasure to open this final day of the Budget debate. In his Budget statement last week, the Chancellor described the choice before our country, standing as we do on the brink of a technological revolution—a choice between embracing the future, building on our strengths and taking our place as one of the nations at the forefront of the new world of innovation, or rejecting that, assuming a defensive posture and letting other countries seize the initiative. We choose emphatically the former. The Budget and the industrial strategy set out a long-term approach in which we can make our economy one that can prosper during the years ahead.

Not just in Britain but across the world, this is a time of change and opportunity. Artificial intelligence and the analysis of big data will transform the way in which we live and work, from the way in which we diagnose and treat cancer to the security of online transactions. The whole world is moving from being powered principally by fossil fuels towards energy sources that are clean, with enormous impacts not just in the energy sector but in the products and services that make up of it.

One such area is transport, where extraordinary innovation is changing how we move people and goods around our towns, cities and countryside. As a result of medical advances and rising prosperity, people across the world are living longer than ever before. One stunning statistic illustrates that transformation. In the United Kingdom today, 15,000 centenarians are alive, but of the people who are alive in Britain today, 10 million can expect to live to their 100th birthday—a transformation in our generation. An ageing population creates new demands in care to maintain their health so that they can make the most of their longer lives.

In all these areas, Britain is extraordinarily well placed to lead. We are an open, enterprising economy built on invention, innovation and competition. Our universities and research institutions are hotbeds of discovery, among the very best in the world. In a world where many of tomorrow’s businesses have not yet been founded, our powerful reputation for being a dependable and confident place to do business, with high standards, respected institutions and the reliable rule of law, is an enormous asset.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): Given that, will the Secretary of State back our local campaign to find a new buyer for the business manufacturing cephalosporins in Ulverston and Barnard Castle, given the highly unwelcome and damaging decision by GSK to review that landmark investment, which was announced by the Chancellor and Prime Minister after the 2011 Budget?

Greg Clark: I am happy to talk to the hon. Gentleman. He will know that we work closely with the life sciences sector. The industrial strategy published yesterday included an important life sciences sector deal in which all the companies are working closely with each other, local institutions, local leaders and the Government. I am happy in that context to meet him and have those discussions.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): The Secretary of State talks about giving certainty to businesses and investors. Does he agree that the contracts for difference regime can be used to bring in zero-subsidy CfDs to give real certainty to people wanting to invest in our renewable energy? Will he commit to considering the case for zero-subsidy CfDs?

Greg Clark: Contracts for difference have brought down the price of renewable energy substantially. We have commissioned a review from Professor Dieter Helm—I know that the right hon. Gentleman knows him well—which has reported, and we will make our response to it. It would be wrong to pre-empt our consideration of that, but I hope that the right hon. Gentleman and others will give their thoughts on the Helm review. We have launched a consultation on that, as he knows.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I note the Secretary of State’s comments about the Dieter Helm review, but will the Government commit to moving away from their nuclear obsession, given—as he acknowledged—CfD has brought down the cost of renewable energy?

Greg Clark: It is my view that we need to have a broad base of power supplies for our security in the future. We are now the world leader in offshore wind, which demonstrates that one comes not at the expense of the other, and that is the right and prudent way to proceed.

We have many world-leading industries, from financial services to advanced manufacturing, from the life sciences to the creative industries. In many cases, they are at the forefront of the technological revolution that is sweeping the world.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): What further assistance are the Government planning to give to research and development for small modular reactors as part of the nuclear sector, potentially a very important and useful source of energy? What consideration has the Secretary of State given to the suitability of existing nuclear sites, such as Dungeness in my constituency, as locations for SMRs?

Greg Clark: I know that my hon. Friend takes a great interest in this. We have an energy innovation programme, about which we will make some announcements before long. That will address the question of what types of technologies should be moved along
from research to development and implementation. He will have an interest in that and I will make sure that he is given the details.

To capitalise on our strengths, we need to reinforce them and project them into the future. We also need to address our weaknesses. We are proud of the fact that more people are employed in this country than ever before—an extraordinary achievement, with 3 million extra jobs created in a time when the Labour party predicted that millions of jobs would be lost. But compared to some of our competitors, on average, we work harder and longer to produce at the same level as they do. We need to raise our productivity, as the Chancellor made clear in his Budget statement.

As the House knows, to a large extent, it is a problem of disparities, rather than a uniform picture. We have industries, companies, people and places that are among the most highly productive on the planet, but we have what the Bank of England has called an unusually long tail of companies and places whose level of productivity is below that of the top performers. The challenge is clear: to reinforce the performance of the top and build on those strengths, while spreading that excellence throughout the economy and the country. That is exactly what we have in mind.

Greg Clark: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. That is below that of the top performers. The challenge is clear: to reinforce the performance of the top and build on those strengths, while spreading that excellence throughout the economy and the country. That is exactly what we have in mind.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): I agree with the Secretary of State about regional disparities and the way in which the industrial strategy tries to tackle them. The east midlands needs investment in capital to raise productivity, so I ask him to look into that. Will he also speak to the Transport Secretary and others about the Government’s failure to electrify the midland main line? As he knows, many of us have campaigned for that over a number of years, but the Government have now rowed back on it.

Greg Clark: I absolutely recognise that one of the big strengths of the east midlands is that it is connected to the rest of the country, and it is essential that those connections continue to improve. The hon. Gentleman will know that a fund was established in the Budget for cities and city regions to improve the connections in and around those cities. That is important, but it is in addition to the importance of connections to the rest of the country, so I will raise his point with the Transport Secretary.

Let me say something about ideas and the importance of innovation to our economy. We can be the world’s most innovative economy, given the strength of our science base and our researchers. Throughout our industries, we have some of the most creative people in the world.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I just want to probe the Secretary of State about what thinking has been going on in government following Bill Gates’s speech in the spring about taxing robots. We only have to go into a high street shop to see that many jobs have been displaced by machines, which are not taxed. If a person was still working there, they would be paying tax to the Exchequer, and that money could help future innovation. Have the Government given any thought to all those labour-saving devices and to getting some revenue from the way in which robots are doing many of the jobs that people used to do?

Greg Clark: We need to embrace the technologies of the future. If we are in the lead, we can benefit from being the place that develops, applies and manufactures many of these products. Whenever we have taken the lead in this country, we have reaped the benefits. It is in those areas where we have lost our advantage that we have ended up importing goods and services from around the world. We need to lean into the future and ensure that we are the place in the world where the firms of the future locate to develop and manufacture their products.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The Secretary of State will probably not agree with this, but I believe that we still have a financial gap in this country, particularly when it comes to science and technology, because venture capitalists simply do not know how to make assessments on such things. Those people are also disproportionately located in this city region rather than other parts of the country. Will the right hon. Gentleman look seriously at the capacity of those industries to see whether we could make some structural changes that would benefit the whole nation?

Greg Clark: I will indeed. I am coming on to precisely that point. The hon. Gentleman has a distinguished record of leading Greater Manchester—with some success—in promoting the vitality and attractiveness of that important part of the economy.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Surely one of the ways in which we can improve innovation and productivity is by having better broadband and telephony. I heard what the Secretary of State said yesterday, but in my area we have zero G, not 5G. Would he like to encourage my area by saying that the strategy is meant for the whole country, not just towns and cities?

Greg Clark: It certainly is. There are significant opportunities in many of our rural areas, and it is essential that the progress we make in our towns and
cities is shared with our rural areas, of which my hon. Friend’s constituency is a particularly attractive and productive example.

Several hon. Members rose—

Greg Clark: Let me make some progress now, because I am about to come on to the points that hon. Members are raising.

Last week’s Budget outlined the biggest increase in public research and development investment for 40 years. It is growing as a share of GDP and contributing to our commitment to invest 2.4% of GDP in research and development by 2027, rising to 3% in the long term. One aspect of this increased funding is a strength in places fund, which will grow our research and innovation strengths in every part of the United Kingdom, recognising that there are strengths in all parts of the country, not just in London and the south-east.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Rebalancing the economy is a key part of the industrial strategy, and one of the reasons why London gets a much better deal on investment is its ability to attract private sector investment, which the north has very little capability to do. Has my right hon. Friend any plans to try to resolve that issue, so that we can attract more private sector funding for infrastructure investment in the north?

Greg Clark: I have indeed, and I will come on to that in a moment, if my hon. Friend will bear with me.

Let me say something about skills. We are creating new job opportunities, but I say to the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil), who raised a point about robots, that if jobs change, we need to ensure that people have the ability to train and develop the skills they will need for the jobs that are being created. The consultation on the industrial strategy established what every Member knows: job opportunities, especially in companies in the technical sectors, require education and training, particularly in maths, digital skills and other aspects of our technical education. There are skills shortages around the country, and great careers would be available to young people and to those who are changing career if only they had that educational base. The significant investment in maths, digital and technical education that was announced in the Budget is therefore important, as is the national retraining scheme, which will work with employers and trade unions, beginning with digital and construction training.

On infrastructure, I can tell the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) that the Chancellor has announced an £8 billion increase in the national productivity investment fund, taking it to £31 billion, and extended it to 2022-23. That will enable us to invest in our physical infrastructure and also, as my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) said, in our digital infrastructure as we develop the next generation of full-fibre networks, trial the use of 5G and boost mobile communication on our railways. That, too, is important right across the country. We will also support electric vehicles through the charging infrastructure fund. If we are going to manufacture those new vehicles, we have to be the place in the world in which they can be deployed most effectively.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Green growth is clearly part of our future as we move forward in the economy. Does my right hon. Friend agree that hydrogen batteries are as important as electric vehicles?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that hydrogen offers big advantages. It is a clean fuel, and this country has great expertise in developing and applying it.

Let me say something about business finance, which has already come up in the debate. In a strategy that connects our areas of strength, it is essential that we allow the businesses that are growing across our country to benefit much more than previously from our financial services sector, which is one of the most significant in the world. The deep pool of capital that we have should be available to growing companies up and down the country. The Budget therefore includes a new £2.5 billion investment fund, incubated in the British Business Bank, to drive forward more investment into growing companies across the country. The British Business Bank will establish a network of regional managers by autumn next year, ensuring that it is not just in London and the south-east that these sources of finance and advice are available, as it is essential that they are in place right across the UK.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): The reality is that the Office for Budget Responsibility downgraded forecasts for business investment, productivity and growth in the economy for the entire forecasting period, so what the Chancellor announced in last week’s Budget clearly does not go far enough.

Greg Clark: I think the hon. Gentleman misunderstands what was said. The OBR recognised that its forecast that the productivity rate would recover after the financial crisis, which it has been making for many years, has not been realised. There has been no new event; it has just recognised what has happened, which has had consequences for the financial forecasts. Faced with that, the right thing to do is to look seriously for the long term—I do not think that this matter divides Members—at how we can act on the foundations of productivity. Talking about investment in research and development, the infrastructure that we depend on and sources of finance for growing businesses in every part of the country is a serious response to the OBR’s revised productivity forecast.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): As 100 new jobs come to Hedge End and 500 to Chandler’s Ford, productivity and accessibility are really important to the Solent area. Will the Secretary of State work with local enterprise partnerships to ensure that infrastructure and the need for local investment feed into the industrial strategy?

Greg Clark: I will indeed. Throughout my time in this House and in this Government, I have promoted the importance of places and local leadership and of ensuring that investment decisions benefit from local knowledge and local decisions. The Budget and the industrial strategy reinforce that. To have a prosperous United Kingdom, every part of it needs to be maximising its potential, so the strategy very much works with cities, towns and regions across the UK. We are inviting areas to promote local industrial strategies that state what
needs to be done locally to make a particular town, city or county fit for the future and able to attract new business investment.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Following the Secretary of State’s announcement of the industrial strategy, we had a meeting in Leicester just yesterday to discuss the infrastructure needs of the east midlands. The east midlands has traditionally been at the bottom of the Government funding league for infrastructure, but it is delivering the highest economic growth and the fastest wage growth in the UK outside London and the south-east. Think what we could do if we had our fair share of infrastructure spending.

Greg Clark: I will take that representation. My hon. Friend is right that the performance of the east midlands has been extremely positive. Some of its institutions—I think of universities in Leicester and Loughborough—are having a huge impact on the local economy. I look forward to visiting Leicestershire again soon to have discussions as part of the plan for local industrial strategies. I mentioned the fund for improving transport connections between city centres and the towns around them, and that is essential investment in the future competitiveness of our economy.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The Secretary of State is being generous in giving way. How might the industrial strategy develop if we find ourselves with open borders and no border checks, which was talked about as recently as yesterday? If we are to have an open border with the Republic of Ireland, the UK will need an open border with everywhere else, meaning that the UK will not be running any tariffs at all. How will that affect the industrial strategy? Under most favoured nation status, we will not be running any tariffs at all. How will that affect the industrial strategy? Under most favoured nation status, if we have an open border with Ireland, we will have an open border with everywhere else.

Greg Clark: I am conscious that many Members want to speak and the hon. Gentleman is tempting me into a discussion that would take more time than I have. However, our future as a successful economy is about trading more with Europe and the rest of the world. That should be free of tariffs and free of friction, and that is what we want to achieve through our negotiations.

None of the investment in and improvement to the productive capacity of the economy would be possible without a fundamentally strong economy. The essential foundation of future prosperity is to be a place in which global investors can have confidence. It is sometimes easy to take for granted the progress that was made by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor and his predecessor in rescuing the economy from the catastrophic situation in which we found it when the Labour party left office. Britain had its largest deficit as a share of GDP since the second world war. So reckless had the Labour Government been with the public finances that in their last year in office—almost unbelievably—for every £5 of Government spending, £1 had to be borrowed. Unemployment rose by nearly half a million, the welfare bill ballooned and the number of households who had never worked had doubled. If we had continued on that course, Britain’s reputation as a dependable place for global investors to entrust their assets would have been lost, and it would have taken many generations to recover.

As a result of the steady and painstaking work of the British people, however, backed by the leadership of Conservative Members, we have cut the deficit by three quarters at the same time as cutting income tax for 30 million people. Britain has been one of the job creation hotspots of the world, with employment up by 3 million in just seven years and unemployment lower than at any point since 1975. However, just when the deficit is being tamed and we can look forward to fulling national debt, which has to be repaid by future generations, the Labour party—I hope it will contradict me—has adopted a platform that is even more extreme than the policies that produced the previous situation. Labour’s proposal is to borrow an extra quarter of a trillion pounds. As if that were not enough, it also wants to increase taxation to what the Institute for Fiscal Studies has called the highest peacetime level in the history of this country. That would, as the IFS also said, make the UK a “less attractive place to invest”.

It is no wonder that the reaction of employers the length and breadth of Britain has been one of alarm. The chief executive of the EEF said that those policies are from a bygone era. Do they have credibility? The answer is clearly no.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Greg Clark: I am about to conclude.

If we want a strong, competitive economy that is fit for the future, we need to live within our means, create good jobs and pay people well. We need to be a beacon of free trade and internationalism. That is what our industrial strategy and this Budget are about. Prosperity for all is the best alternative to the high-tax, anti-enterprise, job-destroying ideology that has taken over the Opposition Front Bench. Our Budget takes us into the future; the Labour party takes us into the past. I commend the Budget to the House.

2.48 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): I am surprised by the Secretary of State’s comments, which are usually quite measured, and he seems to be struggling with reality today. However, let us talk about the Budget. A substantial section of the Chancellor’s speech on Wednesday focused on the productivity crisis, and rightly so. Labour analysis has shown that we have to go back to 1820, when George IV ascended the throne just after the Napoleonic wars, before we can find a time when productivity increased by less than this over a 10-year period. The result has been catastrophic. People are earning less now than they were 10 years ago and, as the Institute for Fiscal Studies states, average earnings look set to be nearly £1,400 lower by 2021 than was forecast last year. The Chancellor and the Secretary of State have tried to paint that as a phenomenon that is quite separate from the Government—like a sort of freak accident that is nothing to do with them—but that could not be further from the truth. To help the Secretary of State with his recollection of history and reality itself, I will take him on a little trip down memory lane.

By late 2008, it was clear that monetary policy alone was not working in the traditional way—people were not spending and the economy was not recovering. To quote economist Paul Krugman, “the truth is that mainstream, textbook economics not only justified the initial round of post-crisis stimulus, but said that this stimulus should continue until economies had recovered.”
But what did the Conservatives do? The polar opposite: slashing Government spending and investment, and essentially pulling the rug out from under the UK economy.

Not only that, but the financial crash had shown clearly that our economy was becoming dangerously over-reliant, both regionally and sectorally, on financial services in the south-east of Britain.

Antoinette Sandbach: Does the hon. Lady accept that, in effect, 12 previous years of Labour Government had left the economy in that state?

Rebecca Long Bailey: Frankly, I expect better from the hon. Lady; she usually makes very measured contributions. If she lets me continue, I will explain a little about what happened. Perhaps she will make different comments if she asks another question later.

It made perfect sense to use that economic turning point as an opportunity to invest in the development of our industrial base and to address the deep structural problems that had been emerging in our economy since the early 1980s. However, what happened was the scaling back of investment and funding in the tools that business needs to grow and succeed, such as skills, infrastructure, research and development, and access to long-term patient capital.

Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): As the hon. Lady is taking a trip down memory lane, does she recall the Labour party’s repeated predictions when we embarked on this necessary course of public spending restraint that it would lead to 1 million jobs being lost? In fact, 3 million jobs have been created.

Rebecca Long Bailey: Again, we have a Conservative Member who struggles with reality. I urge him to speak to workers in his constituency and ask them about the quality of said employment. I speak to workers in my constituency, and they are struggling in an era of casualised, low-paid, insecure work.

Our productivity was certainly impeded, but the picture worsens still when we focus on the recent productivity and investment figures of many British regions and nations. Stark research recently published by the Centre for Cities shows that London and the south-east are up to 44% more productive than many other British regions, and the Institute for Public Policy Research’s commission on economic justice has found that Britain is the most regionally imbalanced country in the whole of Europe.

What have we seen after seven years of this Government’s single-minded obsession with cutting the national debt? Higher debt and unprecedented downward revisions of GDP growth. As every economist knows, the only way substantially to manage the national debt is by growing GDP growth. As every economist knows, the only way to do that is by growing GDP, but this Government have simply tried to deflect attention away from their miserable performance on GDP.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Will the hon. Lady assist the House by saying how much extra it would cost in annual interest payments if she led a Government that borrowed an additional £500 billion?

Rebecca Long Bailey: The hon. Gentleman should refer to comments made by the shadow Chancellor. It is not as straightforward as putting a figure on interest repayments. Each investment is dealt with on the basis of the level of return to the Government, so each infrastructure project, for example, needs to be assessed on its own merits. The hon. Gentleman should know that. He is a clever young man, and I would have expected him to know a little more about this subject.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I have been in this House slightly longer than my hon. Friend, so I saw the former Chancellor, George Osborne, having to U-turn on his deficit reduction plan. He failed to meet every one of his debt targets. Labour kept debt at 40% of GDP, and now it is 80% of GDP. Does my hon. Friend agree that the carping from Conservative Members is in total ignorance of the facts?

Rebecca Long Bailey: I could not agree more. That is very articulately put.

It is not as if the Government were not warned of the problems of austerity by my right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor. Indeed, the International Monetary Fund warned the Government that “episodes of fiscal consolidation have been followed, on average, by drops rather than by expansions in output... The increase in inequality engendered by financial openness and austerity might itself undercut growth, the very thing that the neoliberal agenda is intent on boosting.

Refusing to heed that advice was a deeply reckless act.

The current Chancellor may well turn around and lament post-crisis productivity, but let us remember that he was in the Cabinet while this economic mess was being created. He is not absolved of responsibility, but he has the opportunity to admit that that approach was wrong and to change course.

Unfortunately, although the Chancellor admitted in his Budget speech last week that there is a big productivity problem—a big gold star for Phil there—there was very little to give our economy the upgrade it desperately needs, nor was there any attempt meaningfully to level up regional investment spend.

Indeed, despite the Chancellor’s jovial attempts at talking up our ability to harness the fourth industrial revolution, the Office for Budget Responsibility looked at his future investment plans and cut its forecast for growth in productivity, but he still had one last chance—the industrial strategy. I waited with bated breath yesterday, desperately hoping that the action would match the rhetoric. It started well enough with the strategy’s stated goal to create an economy that boosts productivity and earning power throughout the UK. “That’s spot on,” I thought. But sadly, having looked into the strategy in a little more detail, it seems little more than a repackaging of existing policies.

Unfortunately, the Conservatives have form on this. There has been a long line of PR gimmicks that simply do not deliver. Members may recall that, back in 2011, the previous Chancellor announced a march of the makers, but UK manufacturing has since grown at less than half the European average. Similarly, much was made of the northern powerhouse, which sounds great, but only two of the top 20 infrastructure and construction projects in the Government’s pipeline are in the north-east, north-west or Yorkshire and the Humber, leading my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner) to call it the “northern poorhouse.”
[Rebecca Long Bailey]

No one can argue with the core principles outlined in the 255-page document we saw yesterday but, as the Financial Times summarised today, “the judgment being passed...is that it amounts to a good start—but much still remains to be done to ensure success.” Although the strategy certainly acknowledges many of the fundamental problems our economy faces, I fear that the level of detail and proposed investment simply do not match the surrounding rhetoric, falling far short of what is needed.

The White Paper gives us a handy one-page summary of the strategy’s key policies to strengthen the “foundations of productivity.” It is perhaps poignant to point out that even the previous Chancellor was trying to fix our foundations and outlined a productivity plan called “Fixing the foundations” two years ago. What happened to that? I digress slightly.

Let us look at the first foundation: ideas. The key policies are raising total R and D investment to 2.4% of GDP by 2027, increasing the R and D tax credit and allocating some of the increased spend to a second wave of the industrial strategy challenge fund. Although increasing R and D spend is, of course, a step in the right direction, it is an unambitious target.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Given that this is the largest increase in research and development and innovation funding in more than 40 years, what part of it is unambitious?

Rebecca Long Bailey: The hon. Lady misses the point. The UK has been below the OECD average of 2.4% of GDP for years, and we are way behind global leaders such as South Korea, Japan, Finland and Sweden, which all spend at least 3% of GDP on R and D. If we are to be in any way capable of competing on a world stage, we have to up our game. If the Government really want us to be at the forefront of the fourth industrial revolution, they should be aiming above the average, rather than just trying to catch up.

Furthermore, not reforming where and how it is spent risks widening regional divides, as almost half of regional equality.

Rebecca Long Bailey: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his extremely long comment. He made some valid and interesting points, and we can all agree that the Government’s shambolic handling of Brexit undermines our industrial strategy going forward. Labour’s industrial strategy, however, is committed to achieving 3% of GDP spent on research and development by 2030 and reviewing Government channels for disbursing public R and D funding, with a view to encouraging greater regional equality.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend and neighbour is making an excellent speech. On research funding, is she aware that more than two thirds of health innovation research money goes to the “golden triangle”, despite the fact that Greater Manchester has a cutting edge in life sciences? Would that not be a good place to start?

Rebecca Long Bailey: I thank my hon. Friend and neighbour for her contribution, and she is correct in what she says. I do not think we saw anything in the industrial strategy that goes any way towards rebalancing the regional divides in investment spending in R and D. Critically, a Labour Government would also ensure that the UK maintains our leading research role by seeking to stay part of Horizon 2020 and its successor programmes after we leave the EU. As with so many areas outlined in the White Paper, the UK’s research role is compromised by the Government’s reckless and cliff-edge approach to Brexit.

Let me turn to the second foundation: people. Key policies include establishing a technical education system, investing £406 million in maths, digital and technical education, and creating a national retraining scheme with an investment of £64 million. Again, the intent is good, but let us remember that the Government cut £11.15 billion from the adult skills budget from 2010 to 2015. Similarly, on first analysis the £406 million appears to be the sum of the amounts the Government have already spent on maths, computing and digital skills.

The reality is that the Chancellor has overseen the steepest cuts to school funding in a generation, at £2.7 billion since 2015, according to the National Audit Office, and a cap on public sector pay that has seen the average teacher lose £5,000 since 2010. / Interruption. / Unfortunately, the long term results of that are clear, and I do not know why Government Members are protesting. The Government have missed their recruitment targets five years running, and for two years in a row more teachers have left the profession than joined. The policies contained in the White Paper are a start, but they are not even enough to undo the damage since 2010, let alone form part of a decent industrial strategy.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con) rose—

Rebecca Long Bailey: I am going to make some progress.

The strategy identifies infrastructure as the third foundation of productivity and outlines £31 billion of investment through the national productivity investment fund, with some ring-fenced for the necessary infrastructure for electric vehicles and boosting digital infrastructure. As I outlined yesterday, TUC analysis shows that that £31 billion increases investment to just 2.9% of GDP, whereas the average spent on investment by leading
industrial nations in the OECD is at least 3.5%. In addition, it is unclear whether the extra £7 billion announced in last week’s Budget is new money at all, rather than a re-allocation from other areas of capital spend which was previously budgeted—it would help if those on the Government Front Bench listened to this question, as it is important. Perhaps the Secretary of State can confirm the meaning of footnote 3 in table 2.1 of the Budget Red Book, because it does not appear to be very clear.

Key policies to improve the business environment are sector deals; a £2.5 billion investment fund incubated in the British Business Bank, as announced in the Budget; and yet another review of encouraging growth in small and medium-sized enterprises. That is, sadly, another case of lacking ambition—

Andrew Bridgen: Can the hon. Lady explain how the Labour party’s declared policy of huge increases in corporation tax is going to encourage companies to invest in R and D, and become more competitive and productive? Is she not part of a party that still believes it can tax the country to prosperity?

Rebecca Long Bailey: I applaud the hon. Gentleman’s attempts at crowbarring that in there. I was talking about access to SME finance, so I will carry on.

Ruth George: As there is tax relief for R and D, the higher the rate of corporation tax, the greater the incentive for companies to invest in R and D, as the hon. Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) would do well to learn.

Rebecca Long Bailey: I thank my hon. Friend for her comments. The Government’s proposals on unlocking access to finance for business lack ambition and fail to recognise the impediments many businesses face when attempting to access finance. Indeed, Craig Berry, a member of the Industrial Strategy Commission, has said: “the plan for unlocking private investment is under-cooked and, frankly, pitiful.”

Furthermore, the proposed sector deals appear very narrow and the strategy as a whole will do nothing to help the millions who work in retail, hospitality, care and other large low-wage, low-productivity sectors. A large proportion of those people are women, but, as we know, the Government do not have the best record when it comes to supporting women in the economy. [Interruption.] If I were a Conservative Member, I would listen to this, because these are the stark statistics: men are expected to receive 46% more of the funding from this Budget than women; and the Budget made no impact on the shocking fact that 86% of tax and benefit changes since 2010 have come at the expense of women, according to Labour and House of Commons Library research. That is scandalous.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con) rose—

Rebecca Long Bailey: I will make some progress. Key to improving productivity and living standards is not just supporting those sectors we know we have strengths in and the ability to generate high returns, but using our endeavours to transform what have been traditionally viewed as low productivity sectors and make sure that they become the leading sectors of the future.

Briefly, while we are on employment, let me say that I am shocked to see the Government lauding the fact that some workers do not have adequate employment or trade union rights as some kind of competitive advantage. Celebrating the flexibility of our labour force when their recent Taylor review clearly highlighted the imbalance of flexibility between employer and employee in many workplaces seemed a little bizarre when I came across it in the White Paper. True two-way flexibility, where employees can indeed choose it to improve their lifestyle, rather than have flexibility imposed upon them because there is no choice, should be celebrated, but we cannot celebrate these rare examples at the expense of providing workplace security and enabling workers to make a valuable contribution to the running of a firm, which in turn helps improve productivity. This is why strengthening trade union rights and the ability of people to join trade unions is an important way to boost productivity, and it should be central to any industrial strategy. The White Paper does not even mention trade unions—why is that?

I turn now to the final foundation: places. The Government will agree local strategies, create a transforming cities fund and pilot a teacher development premium “for teachers working in areas that have fallen behind”. I am afraid we have heard all this before. The northern powerhouse, one of the Chancellor’s flagship policies to transform northern cities, is not delivering, as I outlined earlier. Without a substantial increase to level up regional investment, as Labour called on the Chancellor to do in the Budget, the local industrial strategies will simply fail. I am afraid the policies that the Government have identified as key to the industrial strategy are simply not going to deliver the scale of change needed to turn the economy around.

I am coming to the end of my remarks, but I wish briefly to say something about the Government’s grand challenges. I am pleased that they have chosen to talk about grand challenges, as that mirrors the Labour party policy of advocating missions to deal with the big issues of our time. One of the Government’s four grand challenges is to “maximise the advantages for UK industry of the global shift to clean growth”.

That is simply laughable in the context of their track record on supporting green energy, and especially so given that last week’s Budget essentially closed down support for much low-carbon development in the UK. There will be no new low-carbon electricity levies until 2025, with no alternative funding outlined. Nor was there any support for, or indeed any mention of, specific renewable projects such as the Swansea tidal lagoon. There is a huge contradiction between the Government’s rhetoric on clean growth and the reality of their policies.

There are some moments in history that can have a lasting impact for years and decades to come. What we do at such moments will determine not only our future but the future of our children. The 2008 recession and its aftermath was one of those moments, but the Government’s austerity policies and the reduction of investment and detail to match, prospects for productivity growth are considerably bleak.
A few weeks ago, I opened a food bank in my constituency. I usually love going to ribbon-cutting opportunities, as they are a chance to celebrate the great things that happen in my city, but on that day I felt nothing but shame—shame that in one of the world’s richest economies in the world, one of the world’s leading industrial nations, with the greatest minds and businesses of our time, we have built an economy that has simply squandered that greatness and that forces even those in work to rely on charity just to get by. This is not the Britain of the future and it is not the Britain that I want to create, so it is time the Government woke up and halted the greatest act of recklessness in a generation.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): I am afraid that time will prevent me from following the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) too far in some of her analyses. I shall certainly resist the temptation to go into her rewriting of history, in which she glossed over a Government who carried on borrowing money during an entirely artificial boost in tax revenues, at a time of an artificial credit boom, and then found themselves hopelessly in debt at the time of the crash, leaving the 2010 Government with a colossal deficit and a huge burden of rapidly mounting debt, which they have managed strongly so far. I wish to look at where we are now and to look ahead. I should certainly resist the temptation to start re-fighting the battles on how the Labour party ruined the economy of the 2000s.

Ruth George: Having been partisan, I shall give way.

Mr Clarke: In its period of office, the Labour party was so out of control and so wrong in its reaction to events that early on it almost started to repay the national debt at the time of the dotcom boom, which boosted tax revenues to an extraordinary extent. The Labour Government found that their tax revenues had been boosted for reasons that they did not properly analyse, and they just carried on borrowing on top of that. The figures looked quite respectable until suddenly the floor fell away. There was the credit crunch. Down went the tax revenues. They were left exposed, with an accumulation of errors that led to the soaring deficit and the soaring debt that are a burden on us now and will be a burden for our children.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): No. I said that I am not going to re-fight the politics of the 2000s and I am not.

This was a strong and sober Budget that I am glad to welcome, just as I welcome the industrial strategy of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. It was not dramatic. Some Budgets have plenty of glittering prizes and dramatic changes. This was not exactly a non-event, but it contained quiet, small and valuable measures. That was what we needed. Indeed, it was a sign that the Chancellor of the Exchequer resisted some of the ridiculous lobbying he faced from all sides of the public sector and some of the ridiculous advice he was getting from those who wanted him to buy political popularity or to believe that reckless spending can solve all economic problems. This was the Budget of a competent Chancellor of the kind that this country very much needs at this difficult time.

Luckily for the Chancellor, the background to the Budget was made a little more gloomy by the OBR’s choosing this Budget to change the forecasts that it had, unfortunately, got wrong, and most people did not realise it. There were not many people who pointed out at the time that the OBR was going to be wrong, but the OBR took on a more sensible productivity projection, which gives us considerable problems for the years ahead. The Chancellor has also delivered a Budget at a time when growth has slowed because of the initial impact of the Brexit vote: devaluation and the effect of that on consumer demand.

The background is also one in which monetary policy is not of much assistance. Because of the actions the independent Bank of England had to take after the crisis, we are still being sustained by the aftermath of quantitative easing and quite artificially low interest rates, with the Governor having little opportunity to move rapidly to get back to something like normality. Those interest rates are actually having a distorting effect on some aspects of the markets inside this country. Consumer borrowing is rising to worrying levels and we are now beginning to see demand ease because of the effect of inflation on prices and on the ordinary customer, so it was hardly the kind of Budget that one would envy the Chancellor’s being faced with giving. He faces a lot of problems, and he had also to deal with the uncertainty over the next two or three years.

Uncertainty extends beyond our domestic obsessions: there is great uncertainty globally. We could be threatened if oil prices continue to rise—that has had a dramatic effect on our economy in the past. We are currently being helped by rapid growth in some of our most important markets. The US and eurozone economies are growing at strong rates, and they are important markets to us, particularly the second. Both look fragile, though, and I do not think anybody would guarantee that that growth is going to be sustained for the next two or three years.

The Chancellor and the Government must be careful because, quite plainly and indisputably, the reality is that we do not yet know what form our exit from the European Union will take—this is not the day for debating that—and we do not know what kind of trading deal we will have in a couple of years. As the Governor of the Bank of England confirmed yesterday, if, by mistake, we have a hard Brexit, or a deal-free Brexit—I am talking about mistakes on both sides of the channel because no sensible person would want that—it will be quite a serious shock to the economy of the western world and to this country in particular. Therefore, a prudent Budget was what was required.
Nevertheless, the Chancellor was able to relax fiscal discipline a little—it was rather more than one expected, but he did not lose control. He resisted all the lobbies that were coming in from every public service, with some really quite distinguished public servants giving dramatic descriptions, as they quite often do before a Budget, of the effect on their services. Tens, if not hundreds, of billions will be put in. He was able to ease some of the financial pressures on the national health service within a reasonable level. He rightly found some resources for housing, because we have a dysfunctional housing market. However, he would have been extremely reckless and irresponsible had he gone any further than the slight fiscal easing that he carried out.

How the Chancellor must have wished to give the traditional first Budget of a new Parliament. A Chancellor facing a new Parliament with a decent parliamentary majority does not set out to do a popular Budget—they do the tough and difficult things. One judges a Chancellor not by whether it makes good headlines the next week and whether everybody is getting very excited about it, but by its impact on the performance of the British economy and on the daily lives of its citizens in two or three years. Had we had a reasonable majority, the temptation would have been to take some tough and necessary decisions, which would have made it easier to shift into other areas. One day, we will stop a fuel tax freeze. One day, we will address the anomaly whereby self-employed people—if they can get themselves so categorised—pay far less in taxation than people in employment doing similar jobs. However, the idea that we can have a majority for either of those measures in this particular Parliament is, regrettably, an illusion.

Dare I say it, but one day, someone will address some of the happy gifts that I receive from the Government as a man past the ordinary retirement age still in full-time work, earning rather more than the national average income? I have just received my tax-free, cash present before Christmas, with which Mr Gordon Brown tried to buy my vote, and the winter fuel benefit. I get my free bus pass of course. I am receiving a retirement pension, which is protected by the triple lock, so that part of my income is rising much faster than that of most of the people I know. When it comes to paying taxation on my salary, which we all receive in this House, I pay less taxation than most people sitting in this Chamber because I pay absolutely no national insurance. Now that is very nice. If I could remember which party gave my generation all those bribes, I would probably vote for the one that gave me most of them, but I cannot for the life of me remember who put them in various Budgets over the years. I could go on.

There is a serious point. Before we all start making reckless promises for—dare I say it?—the next election that absolutely nothing of that kind will be touched by a future Government, we should remember that there are younger people who are in a less fortunate position than I am who are paying taxation to pay for all that and that there are constraints on the Government who would like to spend some more money—as we all would—on very important public services when the opportunity arises. The generational injustice—to use a rather corny phrase that is now very fashionable, but it sums up the problem—which exists in these affairs in this country will one day have to be addressed.

We are still able to do some adventurous things. The industrial strategy of the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy shows that, looking ahead, the right things are being addressed and the right priorities are being chosen. We are seeking to advance those changes that have to take place in our economy that will give the next generations the best prospect of making this country, once again, one of the most rapidly growing and prosperous nations in the world.

I applaud the priorities that have been chosen. Plainly, we must invest more in infrastructure. However, I add, as we all agree that we should spend more on infrastructure, that we should avoid believing that all infrastructure spending is automatically a good thing for the environment. Successive Governments of the past have done in for prestige projects or politically useful ones in marginal seats and so on. All of them need to be appraised sensibly with the help of the private sector and a good business case, so that we prioritise in our infrastructure spending those things that actually boost the real economy and manufacturing and services in this country.

I welcome all that has been said about continuing to address the kind of education required for a modern economy and about dealing with the productivity problem, which has baffled most people. We are not the only country that has found that productivity—for some unforeseen and, actually, not totally understood reason—has failed to rise in the aftermath of the crash. I think that the two things to concentrate on are education and skills training. We have to be sure, and I am not sure myself, that we are going to have the right human capital for the kind of economy that we wish to develop. I represent an east midlands seat, and it has to be conceded that it is particularly in the midlands and in the north of the country that we need to get our schools’ education standards up to the norm in the more prosperous areas. We also need to get skills training of the quality required to provide attractive employees in the kind of sectors of the economy that the Business Secretary described.

Skills training is probably the biggest problem facing the country, except perhaps housing. I have been here for a long time—as I am occasionally reminded by Mr Speaker when he is in the Chair—and we have known for decades that this country has a skills problem. Successive attempts have been made to tackle it, and we are still talking about the same things. It is the quality of the skills training and the relevance of the skills training to the local employment market that we still have to get right.

Finally, a big gap that we still have to address is retraining. Most people will not have one career for their whole life. Even people in work will want to improve their skills or their education to prepare themselves for the next step.

Mr Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab): Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Mr Clarke: I am running out of time; I do apologise.

We are still extremely weak in this country in providing the opportunities for reskilling and midlife training that future workforces will require.
I conclude as I started. This was the right kind of Budget. It shows that we have a competent Government. The Chancellor is the nearest one gets to the strong and stable Government that we promised before we started. He keeps his head, and that is what we require. He has a view to the national interest and a very considerable resilience to the short-term, silly pressures to which he is subjected, particularly by an Opposition who, as never before, go through every problem that is mentioned by saying that the only thing we need to debate is the quantity of money being spent on it. They promise untold billions of unfunded spending in an apparent belief that there is no question in the whole field of government that is not soluble by a little more borrowing and a little more printing of money. That just makes it more important that this side of the House gets it right. The Chancellor and the Business Secretary are getting it right, and I hope that they stay steady on the course they have set for the country.

3.28 pm

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): It is always a pleasure to follow the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke). I was struck by his discussion of his bus pass, state pension and winter heating allowance. It might be that the right hon. and learned Gentleman does not need these things, but if we begin to erode them and means test them, the problem is that those who do need them will not claim, and—I suppose this is an ideological position from the Scottish National party—we would then begin to erode social cohesion on other important matters.

I welcome much of what the Business Secretary says about the future economy, including on tackling long-term underinvestment in research and development, addressing the long tail of underproductive companies, recognising the importance of innovation, big data, the life sciences and the other sectoral areas he mentioned, and the absolute imperative for UK businesses to export more. However, the future economy cannot simply be about supporting new businesses with new products selling to new markets; it must also be about supporting businesses that are already here delivering for their customers, their shareholders and the economy, and particularly, as the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe said, into the EU, which is a substantial market for the UK. So while I certainly welcome many of the specifics in the White Paper and what was said today, I make no apologies at all for talking about the impact of Brexit, which has the very real potential to undermine the good intentions of the plan.

I say that because the uncertainty created by the hard Tory Brexit plans is already harming the economy. The UK Government’s failure so far to secure a transitional deal is pushing many banks, in particular, and other companies to start looking to relocate to other parts of the EU for fear of being unable to trade freely there in April 2019. Indeed, the Bank of England has warned that 75,000 jobs might be at risk in the banking sector alone, and many of those may well move to the EU. It is vital that we remedy that, and do so quickly, as FinTech, which is mentioned in the White Paper, is undoubtedly one of the areas that ought to be able to make a positive contribution to the future economy of the UK. However, if we do not resolve this issue, meaning that banks’ head offices and decision-making functions go, I fear that FinTech and the ability to fund it will be subsequently reduced.

I also make no apology for saying that Brexit has the capacity to undermine the Chancellor’s plans for raising productivity, which we all agree will be vital if our future economy is to deliver success and prosperity for everyone across these islands. The UK is now at the bottom of the G7 for economic growth. The eurozone and other advanced economies are enjoying higher growth, as well as higher levels of consumer and business confidence. These plans and the money to be spent on them—some of the cash is substantial—might barely mitigate the damage of Brexit, rather than kick-starting the economy to power ahead, which we all hope they will do.

Let me put some flesh on the bones of that, because it is important. The OBR has slashed its forecasts for productivity, economic growth and pay growth. The new forecasts show that the economy is expected to grow at below its long-term trend of around 2% until well into the next decade. The downgraded OBR expectations lower significantly the predicted level of growth. Although the OBR previously said that growth would proceed at much the same pace as before the crisis, it has turned out to be much lower.

This goes back to something the Minister said as a throwaway. Borrowing will still be at £26 billion a year in 2022-23, but he said we want to live within our means. We all want to live within our means, but when we see a national debt of 87% on the treaty calculation, and when we see borrowing of £26 billion by 2022-23—the current account was supposed to be in balance or in surplus in 2015—I think we can say with some certainty that the Government have failed to deliver every single one of the targets they have set since they came to power, with a Tory Chancellor, in 2010.

Sir Edward Davey: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the real story behind this Budget was the growth forecast, which will impact not only the borrowing he is talking about, but public spending and, frankly, the whole shape of the British economy and British society in the years ahead? Do we not need an urgent debate on how we really raise that growth rate? The industrial strategy was simply not up to that job, which is so tricky.

Stewart Hosie: I agree with the first part of that intervention entirely. The big story from the Budget was that the growth figures were marked down over the entire forecast period that productivity per head was almost halved for that period and that pay growth was marked down, which has an impact on real people. As for a debate, we have been having debates about the productivity conundrum and growth since before I was an MP, and given that I am now about 110, that was some time ago. I suspect that we need to look at the work that has gone into the White Paper. Let us get behind the things we can support and make suggestions when we can improve things—my goodness, there are some we can most certainly improve—but we do not need to go back to the drawing board again.

I think that each and every one of us, if given a blank piece of paper, would come up with broadly the same plan with regard to fairness about investment, infrastructure,
education, and supporting R and D and exports. I do not think that there is anything particularly new there. The question for me is: can we deliver that this time, or will this be to no avail if Brexit undermines the potential of any of these plans?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Both Labour and the Conservatives recently voted in this House to come out of the customs union. That will increase trade barriers with 27 countries, as well as another 67 countries that rely on 38 to 40 other deals with the European Union, so we stand a very real risk of increasing trade barriers with up to 94 countries. Surely to goodness that is putting an already perilously placed UK in an even more perilous position? That was supported by the Labour and Conservative parties, hand in hand, damaging together.

Stewart Hosie: My hon. Friend is right. Every single assessment that we have seen, starting with the leaked Treasury document of a couple of years ago, says that the worst-case scenario—if there are tariffs, other regulatory barriers and an immediate reversion to World Trade Organisation rules—is a 10% hit on GDP. Full stop, before we start. I do not understand why anyone—even Tories, and certainly the bulk of the Labour party—voted to come out of the customs union. That was an idiotic thing to do. If we must leave at all, we should look to keep all the benefits of the club, while creating this new trade barriers and an immediate reversion to World Trade Organisation rules—is a 10% hit on GDP, full stop.

Sir Edward Davey: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I was trying to tee him up before. Given the growth forecast and the shocking impact that the situation will have on people's incomes and the public finances, is not now the worst possible time to be leaving the European Union, the customs union and the single market? Is this not the most disastrous economic decision, given the economic forecasts?

Stewart Hosie: Of course, leaving the world's most successful trade body and access to half a billion customers, tariff-free, would be an idiotic thing to do at any point. The fact that we are doing it now—and, more importantly, unprepared—is key. I will say a little more about that.

The existing trade agreements that are being discussed are vital if our economy is to thrive. The Government have suggested more support for exporters to new markets, but that seems to be at the expense of the trade routes that companies already have. To put some flesh on the bones of the last intervention, the EU accounts for 43% of the UK's goods and services exports, and 54% of imports. The UK Government have failed in their intention of starting to negotiate the future economic relationship with the EU at the same time as negotiating the divorce settlement. The delays in the first phase of the negotiations are deeply worrying and undermine the plan. We risk approaching a Brexit deadline without having concluded negotiations, and without a transitional arrangement.

In case anyone is in any doubt about how our friends in the EU view this, Federica Mogherini has said: “It is absolutely clear on the EU side that as long as a country is a member state of the EU, which is something that the UK is at the moment...there are no negotiations bilaterally on any trade agreement with third parties. This is in the treaties and this is valid for all member states as long as they remain member states until the very last day.”

We have heard all the rhetoric from the Trade Secretary, who has conceded that his staff do not have the ability to cut the deals. At the same time, the EU is continuing talks with multiple countries across the globe, including Australia and New Zealand, which many Members point to as post-Brexit allies. That means that we will be playing catch-up with the EU's trade policy, and it will take years—possibly decades—simply to replicate the arrangements we already have, if we do not do so already. Doing so is vital to the trading future of Scotland and the UK and to our future economy.

Another point to make about the EU concerns the free movement of people. Part of the plan is to attract the best and brightest. In my view, we must not just continue to attract them, but keep the ones we have. The 128,500 EU citizens employed in Scotland contribute some £4.2 billion to the Scottish economy. We must not send a signal to people—to those who are here, to those from the EU or around the world who want to come here, or to those who seek the collaborative partnerships in research and development contained in the plan—that the door is now closed. That would be catastrophic, whether it is said officially or that impression is given. It would add to the potential loss of 7% of gross value added to Aberdeen, of 6% to Edinburgh and of 5.5% to Glasgow—a £30 billion loss of GVA to the cities of the UK alone. We will therefore continue to defend Scotland's economic interests now and in the future, and we will prioritise maintaining membership of the single market and the customs union for Scotland—and, so far as I am concerned, the free movement of people, on which this plan, to a large measure, is predicated.
I do, however, welcome much of what the Secretary of State has said alongside the publication of the industrial strategy, which aims to tackle the productivity slowdown and address the challenges and opportunities brought about by technological advance. We agree with many of the five foundations of productivity that he has laid out and many of the key policy areas that he has suggested, including raising R and D investment to 2.4% of GDP by 2027 and the increase in R and D tax credits rate to 12%, as well as the £725 million industrial strategy challenge fund.

We also welcome some of the smaller things, because although many of them are England-only or England and Wales-only, they are still good for the Secretary of State to do. They include the introduction of the T-levels, the additional money for maths, technical and digital education, and the £64 million for retraining. We welcome many investment announcements, including for infrastructure, broadband, energy and transport.

We would not disagree with the four main challenges—artificial intelligence and the data revolution; clean growth; mobility; and an ageing society—although I am rather at a loss to see how the Government can trumpet clean growth when they have refused for a decade or more to address the challenge of the imbalance in connectivity to the grid, which damages the potential of offshore wind in the north-west of Scotland. If the Government could finally resolve the imbalance, which means that a charge is paid by the Western Isles whereas central London receives a subsidy, there might be unequivocal support for the policy of clean growth.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: My hon. Friend brings up a fantastic point, on which his view is shared by the SNP and the Scottish Government. The UK Government choose to penalise the place where the wind resource is, but unfortunately the wind just will not blow at the whim of the bureaucratic pen of the UK Government. I would have thought that they would have realised that after all these years.

Stewart Hosie: One would have thought so, given the number of times the Government have been told that this is an ongoing problem. I could almost repeat it verbatim: there is £23 per kWh charge in the north-west of Scotland and a £7 per kWh subsidy down in the south of England. At some point soon, now that the Government have a clean energy strategy as part of the future economy, I hope that even they might think to address that fundamental inequity.

I want some real joined-up thinking. I know that the industrial strategy recognises, as the Secretary of State said in his statement yesterday, the contribution of the Scottish Government and the other devolved institutions. It is worth putting on record that the Scottish Government already have an economic strategy, with strategic plans for trade, investment, manufacturing, innovation and employment. Following the recent enterprise and skills review, they are aligning their agencies and resources behind those plans. The UK Government should have such a joined-up approach.

The Scottish Government are taking action to support the economy and to counter some of the uncertainty brought about by Brexit, despite the real-terms Budget cuts. This includes the £500 million Scottish growth scheme to target high-growth, innovative and export-focused small and medium-sized enterprises. The first tranche of that money was delivered in June, and a further tranche will be made with an expansion of the SME holding fund, along with the leveraging in of private capital. The Scottish Government are also taking forward infrastructure investment plans, with projects valued at more than £6.5 billion either in construction or starting this year.

In addition to the innovation and investment hubs in London and Dublin, the Scottish Government have established hubs in Berlin and Paris. They are maximising the opportunities there while also developing our existing presence in Brussels into a hub. That is important because there is no point in just supporting big businesses that already export. If we are ever to mitigate the potential loss of export trade with the EU, we need to have the people and resources in place to hold the hands of businesses and ensure that more of them start to export. The Scottish Government are establishing a new south of Scotland enterprise agency.

The Scottish Government are implementing a number of other measures, the most important of which is the roll-out of digital connectivity. Had the roll-out of 4G been left to the market and the UK Government, I understand that we would be about 60% of the way there. However, because of the additional hundreds of millions put in by the Scottish Government, we are at 95%, and we are driving forward the “Reaching 100%” project to deliver superfast broadband access to all residential and business premises by 2021.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: My hon. Friend is giving a long list of impressive boasts by the SNP Government, but he may not know that people on the west side of one of the smallest islands in the Outer Hebrides can get 48 megabits per second. I believe that central London and many other places cannot match what the SNP Government have achieved in the west of the highlands and islands of Scotland.

Stewart Hosie: That sounds to me like a pitch for inward investment for Barra, given what my hon. Friend says about 48 megabits per second. The whole point is that it is possible to deliver to some of the most remote communities the kind of access to technology that every business and individual needs.

We welcome the fact that the UK Government have published their industrial strategy, and we are committed to working with them to ensure that the strategy delivers the maximum benefits for Scotland. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) said yesterday, we are disappointed that the Scottish Government were not formally consulted ahead of the publication of the strategy, even though the White Paper recognises the critical role that the Scottish Government have to play. That is a worry in areas such as life sciences, in which Scotland is a world leader, because a sectoral deal seems to have been agreed without any consultation with the Government in Scotland.

We have set out our programme for government in Scotland, which includes a commitment to create a Scottish national investment bank to deliver infrastructure development, finance for high-growth businesses and strategic investments in innovation. That mirrors much of what the UK Government have said—[Interruption.]
I am conscious of the time. I have had 20 minutes, but I will finish soon; I am sure there will be plenty of time for Labour Back Benchers. We are also committed to a transition to a low-carbon economy, as this is an important economic opportunity for Scotland.

Finally, let me make a point that my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey also made yesterday. We welcome the plan and the substantial sums that are being invested, but we note that the £7 billion for the extension of the innovation fund will not to be spent until 2022-23. If it is important to spend that money, and it is, and if it is important to mitigate the damage that Brexit might do, and it is, I simply say to the Secretary of State that he should perhaps bring forward that spending.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The House is obviously aware that a great many people wish to speak and there is limited time, so we will begin with a time limit of seven minutes.

3.49 pm

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): I rise to speak in support of the Budget and, in particular, the key strategic priority it places on the housing market and increasing housing supply. The Chancellor was right to say that we should have a national target for new home completions of 300,000 a year, but that number should not be a mere aspiration; it is an absolute necessity.

For many people in this country, getting on the housing ladder is becoming increasingly difficult. The prices of new homes to buy are rising much faster than people’s earnings. That has been the case for a long time. It is therefore no surprise that the percentage of people who are able to own their own home has declined. We are not looking at investment in the housing market just for homes to purchase. We need to build a lot more units that are affordable to buy and to rent, and we need a much more active strategy to do that. I was pleased that the Government announced that as part of the Budget.

I have supported the proposed development of the Otterpool Park garden town in my constituency, which would create up to 12,000 new homes. Any planning decision involves a degree of difficulty and it is important that we get the local consultation right, but we do need to prioritise building a lot more homes.

Building creates not only new places for people to live, but a considerable number of jobs in the construction sector. Many people who work in construction say that even now, it is difficult to find the people to do the work that is available. Therefore, it was right that a strong priority was placed on training people to work in the construction sector.

I welcome the Chancellor’s announcement of the £3 billion resilience fund to be spent over the next two years on preparations for Britain leaving the European Union. My constituency of Folkestone and Hythe contains the channel tunnel. Investing in preparedness to manage cross-border trade is a necessity. Anything that, for whatever reason, slows the progress of road freight in and out of the country will cause congestion and delay. That is bad for the economy and has a detrimental impact on people’s quality of life and the businesses in my constituency and elsewhere in Kent.

For me, a key priority in building the physical resilience we will need is not only to manage the electronic processing of freight as it passes in and out of the country, but to ensure that we have the physical infrastructure to handle lorries if they have to queue before leaving the country or if there is any requirement for customs checks as they arrive. The delivery of the lorry park on the M20 at Stanford West that was envisaged and proposed two years ago as a relief for Operation Stack is a vital piece of national infrastructure. I was disappointed that the Government had to withdraw their planning application to build it because of a judicial review, but I know that it is being looked at again. I see that the Financial Secretary is in his place. I raised this matter with him last week and welcome the letter he sent me to confirm that the ring-fenced budget of £250 million that the Government allocated for the delivery of that lorry park is still there. It is a vital piece of infrastructure and we need to ensure that it is delivered.

On the other spending commitments in the Budget, I welcome the additional £2 billion this year and into next year for the national health service. It is important that that reaches the places that need it most. The Health Secretary is not here, but I believe that great consideration needs to be given to GP services and primary care in coastal communities, where the often complex, unique and challenging requirements have led to the average number of patients per GP being much higher than the national average. We are struggling to recruit GPs in such areas. I have spoken to the Health Secretary about that issue on numerous occasions and know that it is a priority for him. However, we need to ensure that the extra money for the health service goes to the parts of the country where it will make the biggest difference.

There has been a lot of talk about increasing investment in research and development and about increasing the research and development credit. That is incredibly important for the future of the economy, and I want to touch on artificial intelligence, which will be an important driver of growth in the future, as the Secretary of State set out in his remarks. Effectively, artificial intelligence is the robotic harvesting of the data footprint that we have as we increasingly conduct our lives online and the designing of new products and technologies around that to meet people’s needs. That throws up a number of ethical issues.

Algorithms that run programmes are private property—they are copyrighted; they are not shared, and many platforms, such as Google and Facebook, fiercely guard the information—but we need to make sure that, when new services are designed based on our data footprint, companies behave ethically and responsibly and that we are able to check they are safeguarding the interests of the people they seek to serve through that technology. That is why the announcement of the creation of the centre for data ethics and innovation is incredibly important. The Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee, which I chair, will be looking at the distribution of disinformation and how companies’ algorithms either support or could act against it. There is, however, an important ethical question about the right of third-party organisations to check the work being done. Innovation through AI can, then, transform the economy, but it throws up some ethical issues that we have to get right.

The Government have taken an interest in driverless cars, but driverless cars, though an exciting technology, do not work without a signal to allow them to receive...
the information they need, which is why the creation of the national 5G network is so important. Without a signal, a driverless car would suddenly stop in the middle of the road. The investment in the 5G network requires investment not just in poles and masts but in fibre infrastructure. A key part of the industrial strategy has to be the move to a full fibre economy as quickly as possible. We simply cannot deliver on massively important new technologies such as 5G for the whole nation without that infrastructure to support it.

As an adjunct to that, I know that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Digital has talked about whether there should be a universal service obligation for 3G mobile signal. In many parts of the country, including Elham valley in my constituency, the 3G signal is weak. Ofcom will shortly be publishing a study on the real level of service delivery by mobile phone operators and whether it falls below the requirement stated in their licences. If it does, there will have to be some further inducement to act to make sure that basic coverage is better than it is. In the longer term, however, we need investment in a 5G network.

Finally, the joint working between the Government, the CBI and the TUC on retraining is crucial. Technology means that people’s jobs will change faster and faster throughout their lives, and people need the ability to retrain throughout their working careers to take advantage of this.

3.56 pm

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins), who made some important remarks about Brexit and the risks we face.

I want to start my remarks about the Budget with the words of the Prime Minister at the Conservative party conference in 2016. She said this about the EU referendum:

“It was about a sense – deep, profound and let’s face it often justified – that many people have today that the world works well for a privileged few, but not for them. It was a vote not just to change Britain’s relationship with the European Union, but to call for a change in the way our country works – and the people for whom it works – forever.”

I agree. The referendum told us that the status quo was not good enough—in fact, was not nearly good enough. Surely, then, the test of the Budget is whether someone listening to it and seeing its contents would conclude that this was a Government determined to live up to her words.

One or two policies in the Budget look somewhat familiar. The energy price cap was used to be part of a Marxist universe; now it is Government policy. The “use it or lose it” policy on land banking was described by the Foreign Secretary—an eminent person—as “Mugabe-style” land expropriation; now it is on the way to becoming Government policy under the wise counsel of the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin)—an unlikely authoritarian Marxist.

On the fundamentals, however, on the underlying economic strategy, I am afraid it is not change, but more of the same. I want to highlight two issues: the refusal to address deep inequality in our country and the continuation of austerity. We all know about the cost-of-living crisis—it is not contested any more, although the Secretary of State did not really talk about it. I will give people just one fact: on the path suggested by the OBR, the average worker will not get back to 2008 earnings until 2025. That is the scale of the challenge we face. Are the Government making things better or worse when it comes to this and the gulf in living standards between the top and bottom? I am afraid they are making it worse. According to the Resolution Foundation, tax and benefit changes since 2015, including those in the pipeline, mean:

“The poorest third of households will lose an average of £715 a year compared to average gains among the richest third of households of £185 a year.”

The Prime Minister apparently believes that the message from the Brexit result was that people felt that the country worked for a privileged few but not for most. The Budget, however, makes the position worse rather than better.

I should love to hear from whoever winds up the debate what Ministers’ defence of these distributional figures is, because this is discretionary Government policy. It is a political choice, not an economic necessity. We need only look at what is happening to corporation tax to understand that. Corporation tax has been cut by more than £10 billion since 2010—and, by the way, businesses have not even been asking for those cuts. The Chancellor could have pointed out that the current rate of 19% was the lowest in the G7 by some distance, and that there were other priorities, but no: he is going to spend billions more pounds on cutting corporation tax to 17%. It seems that he can afford to spend those billions, but he cannot afford to keep benefits at the same level and has to cut them. That is the political choice of this Budget.

Let me turn from the issue of distribution to the issue of debt and the deficit, which the Secretary of State talked about. I am old enough to remember when the Government said that they would balance the budget by 2015. In fact, that was not so long ago: it was in 2010. I am also old enough to remember the 2015 election campaign, when I was told that if we did not balance the budget by 2018, catastrophe would follow. What does Robert Chote, the director of the Office for Budget Responsibility, say? He says:

“If the deficit is to continue falling at the average rate expected beyond the end of this spending review, then it won’t reach balance until 2030-31.”

What an extraordinary failure! A deficit promise is to be kept not five years late, not 10 years late, but 16 years late, and the Government have the cheek to go on about the deficit. They have failed to deliver on the promises that they made, but they are pulling off a remarkable feat: they are both failing on those deficit promises and cutting spending. The Secretary of State did not mention that. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, there will be day-to-day departmental cuts of £10 billion per capita by 2022, with welfare cuts on top. If ever we needed proof that austerity had failed, that would be it. The Government are not meeting their deficit promises, and they are carrying on with the cuts.

There is a deeper point, however. The Prime Minister’s words were right. People were not just voting on immigration in Europe, although of course they were doing that; they were also voting for a big change of direction. Continued austerity, continued spending cuts and worsening inequality constitute not a change in
direction, but more of the same. We know what the Government should have done. They should have realised that cutting taxes for the richest, and the largest corporations, is not the way to ensure that a country succeeds. They should have put an end to austerity and cuts in public spending, and they should have recognised, more than they did, the cruelty and pain caused by welfare cuts that we all see, as constituency Members—including what is happening with universal credit.

I do not know what the precise Brexit settlement will be, but it is already clear from last year’s autumn statement that the impact on the economy and public finances will make it harder—let us be frank about this—to deliver the fairer society that was one important part of the mandate of the referendum, which makes it all the more important for us to have a Government who are committed to action to bring that about. On that score, and by the standards that the Prime Minister set herself, the Budget fails. It proves to me, yet again, that this Government cannot bring the change for which the people voted in the referendum.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I must now reduce the speaking limit to four minutes.

4.3 pm

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband). I may not agree with his message, but I admire the passion with which he delivers it.

Let me, in the time available to me, welcome the Budget and, in particular, the proposals for infrastructure, business and the housing market. In my constituency, we are certainly doing our bit for the housing market. We have completed more than 600 new homes in each of the last three years, and this year we expect to complete more than 700. It is worth bearing in mind that if every constituency were building new homes at the same rate as mine, well over 400,000 new homes would be available this year.

I welcome what the Chancellor said about supporting the building industry, SME builders and releasing public land for building, but I hope that Ministers will bear in mind the need to ensure that the bidding process for the purchase of public sector land as it comes available—regulated by the Homes and Communities Agency—is not so onerous that it deters SMEs from taking part. Otherwise we will miss out on a valuable aspect of that policy.

My constituency is home to some of the UK’s major house builders, and the major brick and aggregate producers. In recent years, one of the biggest deterrents to investing in building materials and energy-intensive industries is uncertainty about climate change-related policy costs, with potential threats including EU emissions trading reforms that would put many firms out of business, even state of the art brick factories. The last two brick factories built in the UK are in my constituency. One was built in 2008, at the end of the economic crash, and one will come on stream in the next few months. They involve considerable investment—about £55 million—and each plant can produce 100 million bricks a year, but even with a target of 200,000 new houses a year, we import 300 million bricks. If we want to build 300,000 houses, we need to build new brick factories or we will have to import bricks from all over the world, and that is not efficient. The uncertainty for energy-intensive users needs to be removed as soon as possible, so that investment can go in and we can be self-sufficient in bricks and tiles.

I welcome the national productivity investment fund of £30 billion. Some of that money is already supporting the 6 million square feet SEGRO warehousing development in the north of my constituency. That will create 11,000 jobs. Unemployment in my constituency has fallen since 2010 by 70%, youth unemployment is down by 80% and only 470 people are on the unemployment register. Those jobs need to go out to the cities of Derby, Nottingham and Leicester, and we need better public transport to give people access to the jobs that we are creating. The continued cuts in corporation tax will ensure that businesses in my constituency and across the country continue to create the jobs and the wealth we need in the future.

4.7 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): When the British people voted to leave the European Union, they did not vote to damage the Good Friday agreement, they did not vote to undermine the public finances, they did not vote to run the risk of falling off the edge of a cliff without a deal, and they certainly did not vote to end the benefits to Britain of the customs union and the single market. None of those things are inevitable consequences of the vote in June 2016: they are the result of political choices, made by the Government that will have profound consequences for the future of our economy, our public services and the people we represent. Those choices and consequences dwarf this Budget and will determine the shape of just about every Budget in the years ahead.

The truth is that the Government have been far from transparent and open about those consequences. The simple question for the House is “Why not?” Why have the Government been so unwilling to acknowledge that the decisions that they have made will produce that result, and why have they been so reluctant to share that analysis? We know what the benefits of the customs union are: it gives us frictionless trade. The Government say they want frictionless trade, but we have it now through the customs union. We know it gives us access to a load of agreements with other countries in the world negotiated by the EU. We know—referring to the point made by the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins)—that it enables the lorries that come off the ferries at Dover to move out seamlessly to help to turn the wheels of industry and stock our supermarket shelves.

Some 60% of our exports go to Europe and those markets we access through the trade deals. Is it possible to imagine any business saying to its biggest customers, “Well, we’ll try and keep on doing what we are doing with you at the moment, but actually we’re more interested in trying to sell stuff to other people around the rest of the world.”?

The place where this falls into the starkest relief is in Northern Ireland. The Government say that they do not want a border, yet they also say that they want to leave the customs union and the single market. When it
is pointed out to Ministers that that could be a bit of a problem, they say that technology will come to their rescue, even though their ideas are untested. One organisation has even suggested that airships and drones could hover above a non-existent border. I hate to say this, but I do not think that tethered Zeppelins or other airships are going to deal with the problem in Northern Ireland. The truth is that, whatever the weather and no matter how radical the technology is or how much the Government spend, it is hard, if not impossible, to see how this problem can be reconciled if we are to avoid a return to a hard border. That is why there is a crisis in the negotiations with the EU, and why the Irish Government are pushing so hard.

This is what lies behind the argument we are having about the impact assessments that apparently never existed. That is what this debate is about. It is not about process, or about what has been released to the Select Committee. We know that what we have been given has been edited, filleted and sanitised. What this is really about is the process by which the Government took the decision to leave the single market and the customs union. Did they consider the fiscal, economic and employment consequences of the two most important decisions that have been taken since the vote in June 2016? If they did not consider them, why not? And if they did, when are we going to see them? None of us knows how this is going to turn out, but frankly, the Government owe it to we going to see them? None of us knows how this is going to turn out, but frankly, the Government owe it to us to say what they are going to do.

Bim Afolani (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend on his speech. In relation to the more productive ways in which he thinks Government funds could be spent, will he elucidate further on what aspects of the Budget he feels could be upgraded or extended?

Oliver Dowden: We should consider whether we are able to release further resources for infrastructure spending. For example, the materials used for digging Crossrail 1 could be released straight into Crossrail 2, and we could look at HS2 and see whether we can release resources into HS3. It is those sort of long-term decisions that countries such as South Korea, China and India are making and that we are constrained from making due to excessive spending on current priorities.

I therefore urge the Government to continue with their agenda for in-work benefits, whereby we are increasing the personal allowance, so that people on the lowest incomes pay less tax, and increasing their income through the national living wage, so that they are less reliant on the state. We are also reforming welfare through universal credit to ensure that people keep more of what they earn and that they are constantly incentivised to move further away from reliance upon the state and towards self-reliance, and the case for doing so is both economic and moral. I urge the Government to ignore the Opposition Members who constantly harp on about universal credit. If they actually go to their local jobcentre, as I had the privilege of doing just last week, they will hear countless stories of how universal credit actually incentivises people to take on more hours of work and creates a smooth path out of welfare and into work.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Con): I commend

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Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): It is always interesting to follow the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Oliver Dowden), who makes a wonderful case for why this country needs not just an Opposition, but an alternative. Let us give him that alternative today. It was a privilege to attend this morning’s commendation service for my local police. I heard extraordinary stories of police constables and their bravery, but those PCs are facing an uncertain future. That is the test for this Budget.
How did we get to a place where people who have tackled rapists, run into burning buildings and taken countless criminals off our streets face potential redundancy, while the Government are throwing billions of pounds into the mess that Brexit is creating?

This Budget speaks volumes not only about this Government’s priorities, but their performance. After seven years, the Chancellor boasted of “peaking” the debt, when they said that they would balance the books. Another year or more has been added to the austerity timetable. Our constituents yet again face wage stagnation. Our public services have been cut to the bone. Universal credit has been made more complicated to administer and more difficult for people to understand. The stamp duty exemption will push up prices and do nothing for the millions of people with no deposit who are renting. Personal debt is at record levels. Home ownership is at a 30-year low, yet one in 10 people now have a second home—it is all right for some, but not enough. Growth has slowed. Inflation is rising. Our teachers are buying basic supplies for their schools. Our nurses cannot afford to feed themselves.

The most terrible travesty of this Budget is that there is money to be raised. Buried away is the Government’s agreement to close the tax loophole on commercial property sales for foreign companies. I welcome that U-turn. Britain desperately needs that magic money tree. However, it is indicative of this Government’s capability that they cannot even get that right. They think that they will raise only half a billion pounds a year, when they should be raising £6 billion a year.

This debate is about productivity. I am worried about the productivity of our Ministers. I was deeply disappointed by the Government’s response to my parliamentary questions and their belief that double taxation treaties mean that the tax would be paid. They do not seem to understand that the Luxembourg treaties will override that and that many real estate companies are based in Luxembourg, so will be exempt from this very tax and from our magic money tree, as will anybody who acquires new real estate and puts it in a Luxembourg holding company before the rule comes into force.

Those are not new problems, but I put them on the record because, clearly, the Ministers with responsibility for HMRC have not even bothered to read the Paradise papers, which set out such deals in great detail. It is little wonder that this Government do not really care about evidence or data and do not want to know the real impact of their policies on the people they represent.

There is clear and explicit evidence of the link between gender equality and global competitiveness. Productivity is a massive challenge in our economy, yet this Government have absolutely no interest in understanding the impact of their policies on addressing inequality.

In the time left to me, I put the Government on notice. As a country, we cannot afford for them to ignore these matters any more, just as they have failed to get to grips with Brexit, failed to deal properly with tax loopholes and failed to pay our public sector workers properly. The Opposition refuse to let the Government’s poor performance, poor priorities and, indeed, poor people skills condemn the future of this country. They say this Budget is about being fit for the future, but they are not fit for office and it is time they left.
Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): This is a Budget from a Government who have run out of ideas and are lacking in imagination. They heralded it as a Budget that will help everyone, but nothing in this Budget will help ordinary working people. In seven years under this Government, we have seen wages fall, and they are now lower than they were in 2010. Personal debt levels are rising, and with interest rates starting to rise we are heading for a massive problem. There has not been nearly enough progress in closing the gender, race and disability pay gaps—that is simply unacceptable. Britain is meant to be the sixth largest economy, yet public and business investment is among some of the lowest in advanced countries. We are also seeing low productivity.

On Brexit, there is uncertainty in all sections of society because of the shambolic negotiations that we have seen so far. The OBR’s downgrading of economic growth and productivity make for bleak reading, and we seem to have a Government who have refused to learn from their mistakes. They cannot even hit targets they set for themselves; they promised to eradicate the deficit by 2015, 2016 and 2017, and now they have pushed it back to 2020 and probably beyond.

Coventry and the west midlands stand to lose out hundreds of millions of pounds in EU structural funding after Brexit. This Government’s policies and, in particular, this Budget do not do enough to stimulate investment and growth and to help replace the funding that will be lost. The Government are not building a strong economy and they certainly are not leading the way for Britain to remain a major world player.

The Budget does nothing to help ordinary people who are struggling up and down the country. The national living wage has been revised down, so it will not reach £9 by 2020, as previously promised, and the Government are persisting with the horrendous roll-out of universal credit, instead of pausing the roll-out to allow the system to be improved. The Chancellor’s offer of help will not help people enough, as it is only a fraction of the £3 billion a year cuts they have made to this scheme. Only £1 of every £10 cut has been put back, and that just is not enough to help vulnerable people. More than 100,000 people in Coventry have used a food bank in the past few years—that is unacceptable in 2017. These changes are made worse because they are being implemented alongside jobcentre closures, and the services on offer are also being privatised. The Government are removing jobs and services from parts of the country that need them the most, including Coventry. That will have long-lasting repercussions.

The housing crisis has not been addressed either. Last year, fewer than 6,000 social houses were built, and that is simply unsustainably low. The Government pledged to build 300,000 homes by the mid-2020s, but houses are needed now—not just any houses, but affordable houses that help first-time buyers. The OBR said that the stamp duty cut would actually end up raising house prices, so this is yet another policy that has not been thought out.

Despite being a key issue during the recent general election, and despite it being a sector in desperate need of investment, there was, shockingly, absolutely no mention of social care in the Budget. Local government services in Coventry continue to have funding slashed, and there is no additional money for the police or fire services, making provision of vital services more and more impossible.

The NHS has again—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I was going to let the hon. Gentleman finish his sentence.

Mr Cunningham: I will finish there, Madam Deputy Speaker.

4.28 pm

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): It is a privilege to rise on behalf of my constituents to welcome this Budget and the industrial strategy announced by the Business Secretary yesterday. In the past week, the Chancellor and the Business Secretary have sent a strong signal that this economy and this country are in the hands of safe grown-ups in the Treasury—[Laughter.] I would not laugh yet. This country knows that what we need is a sensible, one nation Conservative Administration, not a Marxist shadow Chancellor committed to the overthrow of capitalism. [Interruption.] The hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) thinks that is funny; I do not. We do not need Labour’s £500 billion spending spree, which would put more debt on to the backs of our young, and we do not need dangerous talk of requisitioning private property and exploiting the crisis we face to fulfil Labour’s Marxist fantasies.

I wish to highlight three particularly encouraging aspects of the Budget. First, on public sector pay, I welcome the fact that the Government have shown they are listening carefully to the concerns of those in the public sector who feel that, after seven years of the pay cap, we need a different model to inspire our best. I welcome the easing of the pay cap, so that those on the frontline of our public services—the heroes who run into burning buildings and take bullets for us—can get the pay rise that they deserve that is appropriate and affordable. I also welcome the signal that those in the public services who are responsible for management and delivering productivity are rewarded for, and on the basis of, that productivity.

I particularly welcome the announcement of a public sector leadership academy, which my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and others have been instrumental in pushing forward. In the next few years, we need to go further and signal an ambition for our public services to work in partnership with the private sector to drive a recovery. We want an innovation economy in which the public sector embraces innovation, and is a partner for innovation, to modernise our public services. I call that public sector enterprise. Let us be bold and unleash the power of the NHS to work with our life sciences sector to pull innovation through for modern healthcare. Let us be bold in procurement, so that the public sector drives innovation in our economy, and let us incentivise our best public sector leaders to be part of that.

Secondly, I warmly welcome the industrial strategy. I am proud to have done my bit over the past few years, working with the former Chancellor and Member for Tatton; Lord Willetts, who was in the Gallery earlier; Lord Heseltine; and my right hon. Friend the Secretary
of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. Do not take it from me that a Conservative generation has led the way on industrial strategy; take it from Lord Mandelson, who said at Davos a few years ago that it was a new generation of Conservatives who were setting the pace on 21st-century industrial policy. Do not take it from me: take it from the life science sector, which yesterday announced £1 billion of inward investment to create new jobs in the economy. That is the vote that I care about—the vote of business and of the wealth and job creators, not the vote of the wealth and job destroyers on the Opposition Benches.

Thirdly, on skills and infrastructure, I strongly welcome the east-west rail announcement. For too long we have seen investment in our commuter lines, but not enough in the east-west lines. I relish the prospect of an innovation express from Norwich to Cambridge to Oxford to Reading to Southampton—an arc that links our east and west clusters. I also relish the announcement of a new Victorian-model rail company that undertakes development to fund rail infrastructure, allowing garden towns and villages to be built by a modern railway company—the first to be created in such a way for more than 150 years.

On skills, we need a response to the industrial strategy from each locality. That is why I have been working with Cambridge, Norwich and Ipswich to put together the “accelerate east” skills gateway. I would like us to offer every school and college a skills passport into the 21st-century economy.

This was a Budget for business and for Britain, but the big B is Brexit. We need to make sure that in the next 18 months we negotiate and deliver a Brexit deal that supports our modern economy.

4.32 pm

Lucy Powell: The hon. Lady says that there is nothing in the Budget about that, but what about T-levels, maths and computer science training, and adult learning? There is a whole raft of measures to upskill our workers.

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Lady says that there is nothing in the Budget about that, but what about T-levels, maths and computer science training, and adult learning? There is a whole raft of measures to upskill our workers.

Lucy Powell: I will come back to those issues later in my speech. There are some advances, but they are not backed by resources. We have seen huge cuts in post-16 education over the past seven years, which has meant that the gap has widened further and further.

As the Social Mobility Commission again stated today, we do know how to pull up this long tail because we are doing so in London. It requires a pool of talented teachers, resources, and a clear local and national strategy. There was nothing in the Budget on the key issue of teacher retention and recruitment, which is now reaching a crisis point, and nothing on teacher pay or teacher workload. I could not believe it, but nothing was said on school budgets.

Lucy Frazer: Will the hon. Lady give way.

Lucy Powell: Very quickly—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Everybody wishes to speak and that is not a problem, but the hon. and learned Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer) must understand that this would be her second intervention. I will keep moving her down the list, because that is the way that we will move forward.

Lucy Powell: I will not take any more interventions, Mr Deputy Speaker.

There was nothing at all about school budgets, which was one of the key issues in the general election, and they are still falling in real terms. The Institute for Fiscal Studies said that, after the Secretary of State’s announcement in the summer, there was still a 5% cut in real terms, because the number of pupils is going up. We need a much bigger conversation about what education and skills are for in this country. They need to be about delivering for the economy and the society of the future.

Nearly 60% of graduates are working in non-graduate jobs. That is the third highest level among OECD countries, exceeded only by Greece and Estonia. I know that we have many debates in this place about tuition fees, but it is no wonder that they are not being repaid when so many people are not working at the level at which they are qualified to work.

We are in the bottom four of the OECD countries for literacy and numeracy to 18. T-levels are welcome, but with the huge cuts to further education, they will be difficult to deliver. Given that the maths GCSE contains more A-level content, we must ask about the desirability of prioritising compulsory and ongoing GCSE resits over looking at the curriculum and functional skills.

The Government are right to identify maths as the future. The future is about algorithms, matrices, digitisation and automation. Even for the most able, however, our curriculum is going in the wrong direction, which is why the OECD has said that it is “a mile wide and an inch deep”.

By going down a route of rote learning rather than conceptual understanding, we are moving in the opposite direction to all our competitor countries.

There was absolutely nothing about social mobility in the Budget—in fact, the Chancellor did not even mention that in his statement. Social mobility is especially crucial in the early years if we are looking to close the productivity gap. Development at the age of five is still crucial in the early years if we are looking to close the productivity gap. Development at the age of five is still crucial in the early years if we are looking to close the productivity gap.

By going down a route of rote learning rather than conceptual understanding, we are moving in the opposite direction to all our competitor countries.
choices. Of the £9 billion the Government are spending over this Parliament on the early years, 75% will be for the top half of earners, with less than 3% going to the lowest. That is just wrong. This ticking time bomb entrenches social advantage.

Childcare is, yes, about increasing productivity, but the design of the current system under this Government means that we fail to deliver some of the productivity gains that can come with childcare. We really need a social mobility strategy right across Government to tackle these issues.

Finally, let me talk about regional inequalities and disparities within regions, which are all connected to the points that I have raised. It is even more urgent that we get our fair share of spending on infrastructure outside London and the south-east, and that we develop even stronger place-based solutions to deal with local job markets and skills. For example, if the Government wanted to be ambitious —this is not a difficult thing to do—they could devolve post-16 further education to places such as Greater Manchester. They could do a lot more to devolve early years solutions for transforming school readiness, as we are attempting to do in Greater Manchester. It is high time that places outside London got their fair share of transport infrastructure expenditure. We absolutely need to see the northern powerhouse rail connecting Liverpool to Hull via Leeds and Manchester. Critical to that is ensuring that we have a future proofed Manchester Piccadilly station.

4.39 pm

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) when she speaks so passionately about education. I must confess that her remarks about the Prime Minister have encouraged me to focus my speech on house building, which the Prime Minister and her Chancellor quite rightly view as the most important issue facing us.

For my constituency, the biggest excitement from the Budget is, of course, the funding to support Oxfordshire’s statutory spatial plan, which commits to 100,000 new homes by 2031. Cherwell District Council is the national leader in house building—an achievement only made possible by strong local leadership and the sheer hard work of the many volunteers who got our local plan adopted. I see a new finished house almost every day when I return home from Bicester North station, and three houses a day are currently finished locally. I built my own house; it is what we do in our area.

I hope that £30 million a year for five years will help to alleviate the pressure on our infrastructure by enabling us to move forward with larger projects such as the London Road crossing. When we talk about infrastructure, we so often mean roads and railways, but locally we are learning on the job that infrastructure means so much more than that. Those on the Treasury Bench will be pleased to learn that vast products and expenditure are not the only way forward when we look to build new communities. It is noticeable that the residents of well-built houses are happy, and more effort needs to be put into ensuring high standards in building across the board.

This is a no-cost measure that the Government are working on.

Where we do need to invest in growth, it does not need to be in enormous, prestige products, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) outlined. House builders need to deliver on time. Even when they do, councils must be prepared to spend relatively small sums to alleviate the difficulties caused by enormous growth—for example, for around five years of stretched budgets while new schools are created. Children do not arrive in neatly packaged classes of 30 four or 11-year-olds, and existing schools also suffer while numbers are in flux.

I share the concern of my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) that GP services in high-growth areas need small amounts of additional funding to tide them over in times of enormous growth. My hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee), who is on the Front Bench, will appreciate that people seem to need their GP more when they move to a new area, to sort out their existing medication and deal with difficulties in changing specialists. We need to ensure that the infrastructure spending on such issues is readily available.

Mapping needs to be done before the build. Post boxes and street lamps should be provided without the intervention of an MP. Development can only be a positive experience if we bring hearts and minds along with us. I am afraid that closing maternity services at our local Horton General hospital at the same time as building 23,000 new houses does not sit well with us locally. Many new houses in our area have three or more bedrooms, and it would not come as a surprise to learn that some couples want to have babies to fill those new rooms.

Finally, and quite separately, a high point of the Budget for me was the announcement of a consultation into the horror of single use plastics. I encourage everybody in the Chamber to get out their phone, look at the App Store and add the Refill app; it tells users what to do and helps to get rid of single use plastics.

4.43 pm

Mr Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab): We were told that this Budget was going to be a game-changer. We were informed that it would lead to a bright future. I would just like to know, for who? This Budget should have been about tackling the emergency crisis in our public services such as the NHS, where dissatisfaction is up, waiting lists are up and waiting times are up. In fact, the only thing that is down is staff morale, which is at rock bottom.

When we look at what is going in areas like mine, we find that, since 2010, we have had closures of successful NHS walk-in centres used by 26,000-plus people a year and closures of wards, with more to come, under an NHS plan called the “The Path to Excellence”. Local people, having come through cuts and closures throughout the years, call this NHS plan, which was brought up by local NHS management, “the road to ruin” because they have experienced the bogus consultation exercises, only for the result at the end to be that their valued local service was closed.

On pay, there might be a pay increase in the future if NHS staff increase productivity. What a disgrace! It is NHS staff who have kept the NHS going—whether the porters, the nurses or the ambulance drivers—during all the years since 2010 and during these Tory party cuts.
Let me go on to employment issues and social issues. The Chancellor said at the weekend that unemployment did not exist. Well, he wants to come to Jarrow, where unemployment is nearly 2,000—real people and individuals. Everybody on the Government Benches is talking about the jobs boost, but two out of three of those jobs in the north-east are on temporary contracts and that sort of thing. They are insecure jobs—they are not proper jobs.

Somebody should have tackled the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) when he criticised Labour for creating the crash. In the 1970s, the crash was caused by the tripling of the oil price by OPEC in the middle east. The right hon. and learned Gentleman said that Labour caused the crash in the 2000s, but it was an American crash, which George Osborne now acknowledges, caused by the banks.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman talked about the decades of skills we have lost, but that predominantly started in the '80s, when he was a member of the Government and Thatcher was closing the shipyards, the pits and the steelworks. They were privatising all the utilities and taking out of Britain the skills that we need now. People would not have to be employing Polish plumbers now—they would have a plumber trained in England—if we had the services we had in the past.

As for what we have heard about housing, I laugh—I mean no disrespect—because the 2,000 people on the waiting list in my area cannot afford that sort of thing. They need council housing: they want housing that they can afford—that is what they need. They cannot afford stamp duty and these gimmicks such as Help to Buy, which are absolute rubbish. If that is an example for the northern powerhouse, heaven help us with where we are going.

To sum up, there is lots I would like to say on universal credit, the Women Against State Pension Inequality campaign, social care and education, all of which are so important to the productivity of this country. All I will say is that the Budget was a whitewash, and we cannot wait for a Labour Government to bring in our programme.

4.47 pm

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Jarrow (Mr Hepburn).

There is no doubt that we are living through a period of profound change created by the digital revolution. We should all, therefore, welcome the Chancellor’s announcements in the Budget about investing in the skills and technologies to equip our country and to give us the confidence to rise to this challenge. And we should feel confident: throughout our history, the UK has pioneered change that has rippled out across the world. From the advent of the steam engine to the invention of the internet, we are good at embracing change.

In the mid-1990s, at the start of the dotcom boom, I spent a few years working in Tokyo to develop chips with enough memory to enable digital cash on a bank card or to download a film. The new technology we were developing was a million times smaller than the chip in an iPhone today. The rate of progress in the digital age is phenomenal and will continue to be.

The UK is a global leader in tech, supported and driven by the finest academic institutions in the world and by bold businesses that challenge the norm. In Chichester, we are home to Rolls-Royce, which uses state-of-the-art technology to manufacture its engineering masterpieces, which even include an electric Rolls-Royce. My constituency is also home to a £1 billion fresh food industry, where I have seen at first-hand how robots ensure the perfect growing conditions for herbs and salads, as they move from potting, to germination, all the way through to packaging. Technology is already having a big impact on the way we do business in Chichester.

To achieve our full potential, we need an integrated plan that embraces education from primary, where eight-year-olds now learn basic coding, through to secondary and tertiary, and that includes maths and digital skills at all stages. To anybody sat in a local comprehensive school in Liverpool, as I was, I say: these are the keys to your social mobility. It is not just tech; Chichester University has a new STEAM—science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics—centre, adding art, design and creativity to technology, which is a winning combination.

The Government’s ambition is clear, with a further £2.3 billion being invested in science and innovation—the highest level in 30 years. The Chancellor is also investing in infrastructure to develop fast fibre broadband and 5G networks. That is important, as all this talk of advanced technology must be baffling to some of my constituents as they struggle to stream music or even download a film.

As we leave the EU, we must be more flexible and innovative. On our side are centuries of competitive advantage, thanks to our geography, language, time zone, common law and institutions, including the one that I am standing in. Having worked in tech for more than 20 years, I know that this makes us an attractive hub for business, trade and technology, and we have a head start. The UK is host to 18% of the world’s data flows, so we already have a well developed platform from which to grow—in all parts of the country, as we expand tech cities into a tech nation.

I welcome the Budget and the industrial strategy, and I am optimistic about the future of this country and the economy. The Government are investing for the long-term success of our nation, in industry, technology, houses, including council houses, construction, our NHS and, most importantly, people and the skills that they need to secure their future prosperity.

4.51 pm

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan). We began the debate talking about industrial strategy. I approve of the Government’s industrial strategy. The reason I like it so much is that I launched it eight years ago, and it is nice to see the Government picking up on some of our ideas. However, the big story in this Budget is the downgrade in our growth prospects—the biggest downgrade since the financial crisis and in the history of the OBR. It was described by the Resolution Foundation as “the mother of all downgrades”.

The prediction is that the economy will, in a few years’ time, be 2%—or in financial terms, £42 billion—smaller than was thought only last year. That means borrowing £13 billion more in a few years, and £17 billion a year after that. It means austerity going on into the mid-2020s. For our constituents, it means lower than
expected pay. Average income is expected to fall by £1,400 to £1,500 a year. Those are the real effects of the mother of all downgrades.

There is one area where the Government are setting aside huge sums of money, and that of course is Brexit—the £700 million already announced—and we are told that the Cabinet has agreed to pay a £40 billion divorce bill. In a few short weeks, we have gone from “go whistle”, to £20 billion in the Florence speech, to £40 billion now. There is a lot that we could do with £40 billion. We could build more than 70 new hospitals, or over 1,100 new schools. It is more than the total housing and environment budget. It is more than the total public order and safety budget.

In my constituency, the West Midlands police have lost 2,000 officers and £145 million from their budget in the last seven years. They could do with some of the £40 billion that will be spent on Brexit. We have almost 10,000 people on the local housing waiting list. I see these people in my constituency surgery, desperate for a home. They could do with some of the £40 billion set aside for Brexit. The social mobility study out today describes the midlands as a coldspot where social mobility suffers. Nursery schools in my constituency facing cuts could do with some of the £40 billion set aside for Brexit.

There might be an argument for some of that expenditure if it was going to buy us a better deal, but the Government have said that they want to secure exactly the same benefits for goods and services as the ones we have now, not by staying in the single market and the customs union but by leaving them. Countries normally pay for the benefits for goods and services as the ones we have now, but we have chosen to pay to leave it. The Government are not investing £40 billion in getting us a better deal than the one we currently enjoy; they are prepared to spend £40 billion, which could go towards public services in our constituencies, on a worse deal. That was not an inevitable result of the referendum. The Government could have chosen to stay in the single market and the customs union, but they did not, and that is a bad deal for Britain.

4.55 pm

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden).

The Red Book tells us:

“The Budget sets out a long term vision for an economy that is fit for the future—one that gives the next generation more opportunities.”

I speak in this Budget debate in support of the Chancellor and the industrial strategy, because I particularly welcome their emphases on upskilling our workforce and helping Britain to lead the fourth industrial revolution, as technology transforms the way we work and live.

Looking at the Budget more generally, I am pleased to see the Government devoting more funds to science and innovation and helping this country to meet the OECD average spend of 2.4% of GDP on R and D. I welcome our funding for upgraded broadband and 5G, putting digital connectivity at the heart of our productivity plan. Economic success is not built just on steel, concrete and fibre optic cables, however, and I welcome the investment in human capital most of all. The British people will help us to make a success of Brexit, and our engineers, scientists, inventors and entrepreneurs will help us to lead the fourth industrial revolution. It is right that the Budget invests in their skills, education and future.

Getting our workforce prepared for the challenges and opportunities of the new technological revolution is vital to boosting productivity, increasing economic growth and making sure that the whole country is prepared for the challenges ahead. As the Budget rightly notes, employers sometimes report that they struggle to recruit enough people with science, technology, engineering and maths skills to grow their business, and we know that STEM skills correlate to higher average earnings and greater productivity in our economy. That is why I am particularly pleased to see the measures in the Budget that focus on skills and education. From the significant package of support for maths in schools to further support for T-levels and computer science, the Government are equipping our young people—in Havant and across the whole United Kingdom—to succeed in the new economy.

I also welcome the measures on lifelong learning, including the commitment to establishing a national retraining partnership with the TUC and the CBI, the £30 million to help people to retrain in digital skills and the £8.5 million to support university. Those are all valuable initiatives. As the fourth industrial revolution gathers pace and technologies such as artificial intelligence and robotics become more widespread across all sectors of the economy, we will undoubtedly see an unprecedented level of restructuring in our labour market, including in many white-collar professions that have traditionally been resistant to such challenges. That is why I particularly welcome the Government’s laying of the groundwork for a modern skills system that will help us to tackle those challenges head-on.

In conclusion, I strongly support the Budget and the related industrial strategy, which came out yesterday. They help our country not only to get fit for the future, but to get ahead. They will allow us to reach the future first, ahead of our competitors, and secure our prosperity in the years ahead.

4.58 pm

James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): An assessment of this Budget is as easy as a, b, c— austerity, Brexit and calamity. We have had seven years of bad luck for Britain from austerity, the Tories’ self-inflicted Brexit wounds and a calamitous Government with no distinction or record of leadership. There has been reboot after reboot for the Prime Minister, who has no control of her Cabinet. This is a Budget for the driverless car from a driverless Government. Our economy is staring, and yet stalling, at a crossroads. Forecasts have been revised down for five more years. Productivity is down, and real wages are down. Employment is strong, but in-work poverty is the child of this Government’s failed economic approach. The Budget sees the deficit revised up, with no easing of austerity, and inflation picks the pockets of hard-working families. Seven years in, all the pain is for nothing, and into a second scorned decade we go.

There is nothing in the Budget for business concerned by the Government’s no-deal Brexit rhetoric; nothing for students plunged into debt; nothing for schools in the next two years, while they await the jam-tomorrow
national funding formula; nothing for local authorities, such as mine in Bury; which has faced 70% cuts since 2010; nothing for social care or carers; nothing for the rise in crime or to cover for police pay rises; and nothing for mental health. Nothing has changed—nothing!

The hits the Chancellor did get right were the result of learned behaviour, although they were all nicked from the Labour party in a desperate attempt to pick the pieces out of their arrogant early election. To give some perspective, London’s Elizabeth line will cost £15 billion, but this Budget allocates just £1.7 billion to the English regions, including Greater Manchester.

We needed a Budget for Brexit, but this does not come close. The Chancellor shows no appreciation of the fact that the prism through which Brexit and this Budget play out for the rest of the country is increasing daily uncertainty, a thirst for vision and a practical guide to the future. We have a country mixed with impatience from leavers and anxiety from remainers, and the country is in need of unity. The Chancellor is not even out of first gear in demonstrating the threat that Brexit poses, and this Budget is insufficient in dealing with that task. On the referendum, this Government took a public result and shrouded their work to deliver it in secrecy, wasting all the time they have had since the result. We needed a Brexit Budget; instead, the Government published a UK industrial strategy yesterday, but they still refuse to publish in full their assessment of the UK sectors facing Brexit.

There is a promise to build infrastructure and to build 5G networks, but in some areas of Bury it is more Bee Gee than 3G. [Laughter.] I promised I would get that in.

The future of our economy relies not on Tory rhetoric from those on the Government Benches, but on brilliant businesses such as mine in Bury—for example, Milliken, which makes 80% of the airbags fitted to all cars in production; or Dream Agility, which is making possible Silicon Rammy in Ramsbottom. We have a Government who say little about what they want to achieve and who have a tin ear about life away from Westminster. At its heart, Brexit for many of those who voted for it was, from the start, about kicking the status quo and giving a voice to the people left behind. For too many, this Budget still says nothing of their experiences of life, work and business in Bury or across Britain.

5.2 pm

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): Frankly, before last Wednesday, I expected to be a bit grumpy about the Budget. I was concerned that there would be no offer for younger people and that my constituents would lose out again, as they have so many times in previous Budgets. Imagine my surprise, therefore, when I was greeted by the Chancellor’s fair, inclusive and progressive Budget last week.

As I have repeatedly said in this Chamber, the people of Mansfield have in the past felt ignored and neglected by Westminster, and successive Governments have not addressed the needs of that area in their Budgets, but I am optimistic that this Budget covers many of the challenges my constituents face. and there are a number of small steps in the right direction. Although the increase in the national living wage is welcome everywhere, nowhere is that more true than in Mansfield, where 38% of workers are in low-paid employment. That, coupled with the increase in the personal allowance announced by the Chancellor, means that more of my constituents can keep more of their hard-earned cash.

These changes are overwhelmingly welcome in my constituency, but the predominance of low-paid and low-skilled work is a cause for concern. That is why I am delighted to hear that the Government will be offering support for skills in maths and computing, as well as introducing T-levels. My belief is that it is only by diversifying education and offering more technical and vocational options to young people, as is being done with great success in Vision West Nottinghamshire College in my constituency, that we can generate the skilled workforce this country needs to thrive.

There is of course more to be done in creating quality qualifications that lead to long-term employment. I would like to see direct business involvement in education. For example, the University of Lincoln currently offers an engineering programme delivered directly by Siemens. Such involvement allows companies to shape their own highly skilled workforces and provides young people with an open door to quality, long-term employment.

Apprenticeships are also a challenge, particularly for smaller businesses, to manage and I look forward to continuing conversations with the Secretary of State for Education on that front. As MPs with small teams of staff, we know how challenging it can be to organise work experience for even one person, never mind an apprenticeship. We need to offer more support to SMEs.

In recent months, I have been working to highlight the challenge of engaging and inspiring young people—it is no secret that my party has struggled on that front—and I have been talking to younger colleagues in this place about the steps we can take to tip the balance back in favour of those who feel they are worse off than their parents. Housing was one of our primary asks when we visited the Chancellor before the Budget, and I am delighted to hear his announcement on stamp duty and the unprecedented spending on house building. The commitment to a council tax levy on empty homes, which are a huge problem in Mansfield, is welcome news. I hope that it will free up more homes for the private rented sector and for social housing.

That is a big step in the right direction, but I would like the Government to take a lead on the issue and invest in their own house building programme. If we want homes built, let us build the kind of houses we need and make sure that we meet the 300,000 a year target. I am sure that that discussion will continue to be at the top of the agenda.

Yesterday, we heard the announcements on our industrial strategy. I welcome the commitment to spread growth and wealth across the whole UK. In a modern, digital world, it is no longer the case that every business has to be based in a city centre or in London. There are huge opportunities for Mansfield and the east midlands more broadly. The investment in our digital infrastructure is welcome, as is the support for retraining in STEM subjects and the technical education commitments I have mentioned. I hope that those measures are rolled out not just in cities, but across the whole UK. Mansfield has a high proportion of SMEs. Supporting them to grow and employ more people in rewarding jobs is vital for the future and for raising aspiration in an area that is among the lowest in the UK for social mobility.
Although many of the announcements are not earthshattering in isolation, they show that the Government have a vision. These small steps in the right direction, while limited by the clear economic and political realities, show a commitment to advances in housing, health reform and education that are incredibly positive. It is a vision that I am very happy to support.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): After the next speech, the time limit will go down to three minutes.

5.6 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Apart from failing to address the inequality for the WASPI women, last week’s Budget failed the central test; it should have taken this on. Our economy faces the incredible challenge of Brexit and last week, the Chancellor should have come to the Dispatch Box, been honest with the country and said, “This isn’t working. Let’s stay in the single market. Let’s stay in the customs union. Let’s build up our economy from there, and then we will be able to afford truly to invest in our economy.” I will come back to that point, but first I want to turn to housing, which is what the Chancellor said his Budget was all about. He will say that his stamp duty cut is a headline winning move that shows his commitment to a homeowning democracy. Actually, the policy is a failure. It took my two excellent members of staff here, Tom Railton and Ella Crine, precisely 14 minutes from receiving the Budget Book at the Vote Office to send a message alerting me to the OBR’s judgment on the central policy in the Budget. The OBR states that

“the main gainers from the policy are people who already own property, not the FTBs”—

first-time buyers—

“themselves.”

I cannot imagine that it took the Treasury’s fine team of talented economists any longer to tell the Chancellor, than it took Tom and Ella to tell me, what the OBR would make of his policy. The question, therefore, must be: was he told? Did he ignore advice? What estimate would make of his policy. The question, therefore, must

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Dudley South has one of the biggest shopping centres in the country, a new enterprise zone and one of the largest secure industrial parks in Europe, but it has no railway station and on a good day it is probably half an hour from the nearest motorway junction. Infrastructure is absolutely vital, therefore, if the potential of local people and businesses is to be realised, which is why, before I was elected, one of my first campaigns was for a new tram extension to join my constituency with the midland metro network and the main line rail network.

The extension has been on and off the agenda since the days of the old West Midlands County Council in the early 1980s. Understandably, when I knocked on doors, the most common response I got was, “Yes, we’ve been told this for 30 years. It’s never going to happen.” Along with West Midlands Mayor Andy Street, we have continued to make the argument, however, which is why we were absolutely delighted when the Chancellor and the Prime Minister announced at the start of last week £250 million for transport infrastructure in the west midlands, of which £200 million will be used to fund the tram extension out to my constituency, with a tramline to Brierley Hill.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Budget has been great for the west midlands? As he says, it is about transport infrastructure, which is so important for investment and business growth in our area.

Mike Wood: My hon. Friend hits the nail on the head. This has been a great Budget for the west midlands, but not only for the west midlands; it also builds on the Government’s commitment to rebalance the economy and deliver for every part of the country and every sector of the economy.

The £200 million being invested in the tramline to my constituency will have the transformative effect we need in the Black country in supporting our local economy. Independent analysis by Lichfields found that it would have a multiplier effect, increasing the benefits from other economic initiatives in the region. For example, it will increase the annual delivery of new homes by nearly 1,500—an increase of 250% against the baseline if the tramline were not going ahead; increase the number of direct and indirect permanent jobs by nearly 8,500; and almost double economic output from the 2 km corridor around the tramline from £14.4 billion to £28.6 billion, vastly increasing both council tax and business rates receipts by nearly £400 million.
This is only a snapshot of the economic activity that the metro will bring to my constituency and neighbouring constituencies. It will enable the Black country to capture more effectively the numerous growth opportunities presented by both HS2 and the DY5 enterprise zone in my constituency. It will increase the ability of businesses to attract investment, while the enhanced transport between the towns and cities of the west midlands will bring greater access to work and reduced journey times and offer better access to a wider labour market, to the benefit of both businesses and employees. With better transport comes better access to local shops and services, including a wide range of social and community networks. That is why the Budget delivers for my constituency and why I wholeheartedly support it this evening.

5.15 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): Although expectations had been managed, many of us thought that the Chancellor’s Budget would mark a change in direction, given the overwhelming evidence that seven years of austerity have damaged our economy, lost a decade of growth and caused unnecessary harm and hardship to so many people. Instead, the Government have decided to tinker here and there, producing a Budget that lacks the vision and investment that are necessary to breathe new life into our economy. Productivity and growth have been downgraded, which means that people whose wages have stagnated for a decade are now set to lose out and to £900 a year worse off. We have some of the lowest wages in Europe, along with higher levels of debt. We have a Government who use the deficit, rather than productivity, growth and living standards, as a marker for economic success.

It is remarkable that on so many of the key issues that my constituents raise with me, the Chancellor misses the mark, or simply does not even give them a mention. For instance, he had a real opportunity to tackle the seriousness of the housing crisis, yet the Government’s flagship policy is designed to increase demand. As the OBR says, the main gainers from the ending of stamp duty will be people who already own properties, not first-time buyers. The policy will also increase house prices. All that shows is just how ideologically driven the Government are.

Another glaring omission is social care, which is one of the biggest economic and social challenges that we face in the UK. The OBR has made it clear that local authorities are on their last legs, and that those with social care responsibilities have dwindling reserves. This “head in the sand” position has implications for the Government’s broader fiscal objectives. It is time for them to address the social care crisis and to build a social care system that is fit for disabled and older people—a system that is fit for purpose.

The Government also need to address the public sector pay cap. On Tuesday 10 October, I asked the Secretary of State for Health when he would scrap the pay cap. His response was “the pay cap has been scrapped.”—[Official Report, 10 October 2017; Vol. 629, c. 154.]

I ask again: when will the Government take action and lift the public sector pay cap?

I could not complete my speech without touching on universal credit. While the package that was announced last week is welcome, it by no means goes far enough. The removal of the seven-day wait can be deemed nothing more than a gesture. On its current form, universal credit will push thousands of disabled people further into poverty and hardship owing to the Government’s decision to abolish the severe and enhanced disability premiums. There was no mention of disabled people in the Budget. There were no proposals to reduce the disability employment gap, or to increase the employability of disabled people. The country deserves better.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Nearly 36% of my constituents work in the financial and professional services sector, and most of them commute to London. This was a good and sensible Budget for them, because it was a good and sensible Budget for economic confidence in the City and financial services, in which Britain is a world leader. It is critical that we maintain that position, and that we do so during the process of leaving the European Union. Investing in and supporting financial services, like investing in and supporting London, is actually an investment for the whole country.

It is worth bearing in mind data released in a report published by the City of London corporation, according to which the total tax contribution from the financial services sector reached £72.1 billion in the year to 31 March 2017, which amounts to 11% of all Government tax revenues. The bulk comes from employment taxes and corporation tax, and also a bank levy—the banks are now paying a significant sum to support our public services. Maintaining London’s position in that regard will be critical as we leave the European Union. For banks, some 35% of the total tax take comes from employment taxes, but the proportion depends on where they are based. If we shed jobs as we leave the EU, the tax base will be diminished.

I do not believe that that is necessary. I believe that the Chancellor and the Prime Minister want a good deal that will protect our financial services sector, and I support them very much in that. What would damage the financial services sector would be a poor deal—I do not believe that that outcome is necessary or desirable, and I am sure that we can avoid it—and an anti-business, left-wing Labour Government who would scare a way those jobs and that tax revenue and undermine that great driver of income for our public services. It is self-defeating for those who believe in public services to damage our tax revenue. It is worth bearing in mind that the amount of tax paid by that sector in one year comes to half the value of the NHS. I suggest to Labour Members that they should not put that at risk.

It is also worth bearing in mind that, because of our access to the European markets, the sector processes transactions worth £880 billion every day. That is 100 times our net annual contributions to the EU—

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): The financial sector is crucial to our constituencies, and I very much applaud what my hon. Friend says.

Robert Neill: I am grateful to my hon. Friend.

That sum is also 15 times the highest amount that has been spoken of as a potential financial settlement. It therefore makes sense in terms of Brexit to support the financial sector and get a good deal, and it also makes
sense in terms of the Budget to make sure that we have a favourable tax and regulatory regime in the UK that is attractive to financial services.

5.21 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): The King’s Fund, the Nuffield Trust and the Health Foundation estimate that the annual funding gap for social care will now reach £2.5 billion by 2019-20. That will have a crippling effect on the provision of social care, a sector that is already under severe strain and in desperate need of relief, but the Budget offered it nothing whatever.

The condemnation from social care professionals has been as universal as it has been damning. Margaret Wilcox, the president of the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services, said she was “extremely disappointed” by the lack of extra funding and:

“Adult social care needs to be tackled as urgently and at least as equally as the needs of the NHS, in a way which recognises the inter-dependency of these services and encourages a collaborative approach.”

After the Government’s calamitous manifesto U-turn on the dementia tax, the country needed strong leadership and an appreciation of the seriousness of the situation facing social care. That same manifesto described the social care system as not working and promised to fix it, but there was no mention of social care in the Budget, let alone any new funds to address the chronic shortfall—another Tory manifesto commitment broken.

Nearly 1.2 million older people are estimated to have unmet care needs. The figure is up 48% since 2010 and up 18% from last year alone. The Budget offers no solutions to address the forecasted 150,000 additional deaths associated with constraints on health and social care. This is an issue of not just numbers but the Government’s failure to get a grip on the social care crisis.

Having worked in the sector, I have seen at first hand the amazing and vital work dedicated staff carry out on a daily basis. Now those staff who are employed by local authorities will have to carry on with their jobs knowing that their hard work, the squeeze on their living standards and years of wage stagnation still do not qualify them for a pay rise. When will the Government accept that these people are already going above and beyond, and deserve to have their service recognised?

Labour committed in our manifesto that, as we moved towards a new national care service, we would invest £8 billion over the course of the Parliament to stabilise the care sector. It is Labour that recognises that the sector is in crisis; it is Labour that appreciates the hard work of those who work in social care and would treat them with the respect they deserve; and it is Labour that would commit to taking active measures to solve this crisis, not merely offering false platitudes. The Budget, like the Government, is failing those in the social care sector.

5.23 pm

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I have been listening to the debate for some time, and it is worth reminding the House of the Treasury document published as a result of a report done by a senior civil servant, Sir Michael Barber, on the public value framework. It indicated that the way in which we get value in our public services is not simply the input of money, but what is delivered. As we talk about all these millions and billions of pounds that we will spend on this, that and the other, I urge the House to consider that output and delivery are more important that what we put in.

Owing to time constraints, I will not say all the wonderful things that I could say about the Budget. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) talked about certain areas of the public sector, and Conservative Members always need to remember the public sector as well as the private sector. In particular, however, I want to talk about my constituents in Hitchin and Harpenden, who are very dear to me. In their professional lives, they are overwhelmingly focused on financial services and small businesses, and there was one particular measure in the Budget that will really help them: the expansion of the enterprise investment scheme. I have done my homework on this, so I know that the EIS is critical and that the Government have doubled the annual allowance for investment in early-stage businesses and innovative growth capital.

Mrs Badenoch: I wanted to mention the enterprise investment scheme earlier, but I did not have time. Saffron Walden is right next to the Oxford-Cambridge corridor and houses many knowledge-intensive industries. Does my hon. Friend agree that increasing the allowance for the EIS will provide a boost to the small and medium-sized companies that are the backbone of this country—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. The hon. Lady had a good go when she spoke earlier, and a lot of Members have been waiting a long time to speak. Interventions must be very short. I also ask Members to be restrained in giving way; otherwise, it is not fair to all those who are waiting.

Bim Afolami: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. I would add to her point by saying that the EIS funnels private capital that might otherwise be sitting in housing assets or on a bank balance sheet into our most early-stage, innovative and risky creative businesses. That is the magic of the EIS. Such tax reliefs and allowances are beneficial to the country because they effectively mitigate the risk for private investors in risky, early-stage businesses. We need to recognise that fact and welcome the doubling of this investment allowance, alongside the addition of a new test to ensure that the money is going not into lazy, low-risk ventures, but into high-risk, creative businesses.

A point I often make about tax schemes such as the EIS and entrepreneurs relief, which this Government introduced to ensure that we remain one of the best places in the world to develop early-stage businesses, is that they ensure that we do not have to ask our banks to make risky investments. One of the reasons why we found ourselves in the financial crisis was that the banks were making very risky investments, as we discovered from their balance sheets. The EIS allows private capital to be used in productive ways. Many of my hon. Friends have already described the Budget as balanced and reasonable, and I hope that it is also the beginning of a long-term process of a radical entrepreneurial vision for the British economy.
5.28 pm

Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): I want to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Frith), who talked about this being an ABC Budget. I also want to mention my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill), because my constituency has also seen a huge increase in demand for services. In particular, there has been a rise in the number of people who find themselves homeless and in the number of adults and elderly people who require care.

Apart from a small announcement on mathematics, there was no extra money in the Budget for the education system. This is not as simple as saying, “2 plus 2 is 4, minus 3 that’s 1—quick maths.” These announcements mean real-terms cuts and the potential continuation of the recruitment and retention crisis in our education system.

The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), who is unfortunately not in his place, said that he could not understand why the Opposition were saying that the Budget does not do all that it needs to do, but it fails to recognise the scale of the emergency in our public services. There is no point in burying our heads in the sand saying, “Things are absolutely fine,” because we know that they are absolutely not. While both sides of the House have acknowledged that universal credit needs amending, there was a real opportunity to pause and fix it, but it was not taken.

Austerity is hurting and not working, but instead of pausing and reflecting on that, we are continuing with business as usual. We are acting as though everything that is happening is par for the course and absolutely fine. People say, “Why do Opposition Members seem to think there is a problem?” There is a problem because our constituents come to us with their problems. There is a problem because we seem to be avoiding paying attention to their real needs. Instead of taking the opportunity provided by the Budget to assist them, we have decided just to carry on with things as they are. It is fantastic that we will have driverless cars, but we will have all the gear and no idea when people in our constituencies are suffering.

5.31 pm

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): I have been disappointed by Opposition Members, who have failed to recognise a number of facts. They have criticised the gender pay gap when it has actually narrowed. They have criticised school funding without recognising that the fairer funding deal puts an extra £1.3 billion into our schools. They have suggested more spending without being able to respond to an intervention asking what the interest payment bill would be on increased borrowing of a trillion pounds. The Opposition look only at spending; they do not see the optimistic opportunities presented by our future.

Our great country has been a leader on the world stage for decades. We have been the choice of location for foreign investment. We are a global economic power at the same time as being in the top 20 happiest places in the world. We are now at a crossroads, forging new relationships with the EU and the rest of the world while, as the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy pointed out, an industrial revolution sweeps across our globe, and we start from a good place.

Out of 137 countries, we are ranked second for the quality of scientific research institutions, third for the capacity to attract talent, fourth for technological readiness and 12th for overall innovation. The industrial strategy and the Budget will ensure that we continue to be at the cutting edge of technology, innovation and business growth, with £31 billion for the national productivity investment fund, £2.3 billion for investing in R and D and £500 million for a range of initiatives from artificial intelligence to 5G and full-fibre broadband.

However, as we progress through the technological revolution, we must remember that it is equally as important to recognise and value the skills of those who serve us in our communities: those who teach us, nurse us and protect us. The Secretary of State rightly pointed out that we have an ageing population that we need to care for, and the answer is not just technological; we need more people in the caring professions. I therefore welcome the Chancellor’s announcement that he will put more money into the NHS and his offer to fund increased pay awards. We also need to ensure that we improve our skills base, and the Budget includes £40 million to train maths teachers across the country, tripling the number of trained computer science teachers. I welcome the Budget and the industrial strategy, but we must also remember to embrace the new world.

5.34 pm

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): This Budget leaves many with little to celebrate. There is nothing for the WASPI women, who kept their contract with the Government, and nothing for my sixth-form colleges, which work so hard to improve the life chances of children in my constituency. The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) said that a Budget’s purpose is to improve people’s future lives, but the Chancellor chose to freeze working-age benefits until 2020, most affecting those struggling with basic living costs now and doing nothing to provide a family with a Christmas dinner, the cost of which has risen 20% this year. The freeze, and the rise in food inflation, means that huge chunks of the population are unable to afford the weekly food shop or to pay the rent. People are making hard choices, like the mum I saw who regularly goes without her lunch three times a week to feed her family. Those are the people going to payday lenders; those are the people going to BrightHouse; those are the people who cannot afford to save every month—it is about time there were saving schemes designed around people’s lives, rather than expecting people’s lives to be designed around Government saving schemes—and those are the people who are likely to fall into debt.

Some 2.9 million individuals and households are currently struggling with severe problem debt. How many more will there be after this Budget? Demand for debt advice is at record levels. People helped by the debt charities are increasingly struggling to meet the bills. Addressing personal debt has to become a priority for this Government.

The basic cause of debt is lack of money. There has been a freeze on working-age benefits and a 1% cap on public sector pay rises while inflation, particularly food inflation, has risen. Low-income households spend more money on food and basic necessities than those on higher incomes. Household debt is already rising, and it is set to rise further. With more debt, more mental
health issues, more strain on GPs, more strain on local services, less disposable income and less spending power—less spending power is bad for businesses as well as for individuals—this is a Budget that does not deliver for individuals or for businesses.

5.36 pm

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue), who amply illustrates why we need a responsible and balanced Budget. When she describes her constituents’ debt, she needs to consider the situation in the country. We are spending £42 billion a year on interest payments. If Labour borrowed its £250 billion, those interest payments would be dramatically higher and would ultimately lead to a reduction in public services.

I welcome this balanced and responsible Budget that invests for the future. My constituency of Eddisbury has the Winsford industrial estate, which is the UK’s first green business park and first industrial business improvement district. Some 4,000 people work there in industries from food manufacturing to chemical supplies, packaging and engineering. I welcome the measures in the Budget, particularly those on R and D investment and on investment in artificial intelligence.

Technology is fundamentally changing the way that businesses operate, and it is changing the future landscape of the business world. By investing in this way, we can equip our companies to steal a march on international competitors and to ensure that British and Cheshire-based businesses are at the forefront of new global markets. PwC estimates that global GDP could be up to 14% higher in 2030 as a result of artificial intelligence, and it is therefore welcome to see artificial intelligence being backed in the Budget.

I welcome the Budget’s skills provision, particularly in STEM. Winsford—population, 30,000—currently has no sixth-form provision in the town. That will change in September 2018, with Mid Cheshire College planning to open a new STEM centre there. The measures on maths teaching will benefit my constituents. The fuel duty measures will help those in rural areas who have to drive long distances because they cannot access fuel locally.

This is a responsible and appropriate Budget for straitened circumstances. When Labour talks about austerity, let us remember it is really talking about spending within our means. This Budget is a good Budget, both for investing for our future and for spending within our means.

5.39 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): The latest lame defence from this Government, as we stand up for the people of Britain, is that somehow we are talking Britain down—that is nonsense. This failing Government are letting the people of Britain down, driving it down the international league table. We have the worst record in the G7 on wages, productivity, skills and growth, and we are bottom bar one—Lithuania—in the EU on worker participation, and this from a Prime Minister who promised workers on the board. Today’s Social Mobility Commission report has shown that the heart of England, the midlands, is the worst region for social mobility for those from poor backgrounds. The historical comparisons are staggering. This is the worst decade for productivity growth since Napoleon was retreating from Moscow, then to be defeated at the battle of Waterloo in 1815. The last time wages were stagnant for so long a royal prince was about to get married—Prince Arthur, Victoria’s son—Disraeli and Gladstone were in Downing Street, and trade unions were illegal. That was 150 years ago.

Over the past seven days, I have seen the consequences of this Budget. I have seen the consequences for schools and headteachers, with one in tears at the fact that there was not one penny more and at now being faced with having to lay off teachers and teaching assistants. I have seen the police despairing at 2,000 police officers having gone and at rapidly rising crime, with violent crime up 6%, gun crime up 15% and knife crime up 17%. At a packed meeting last Friday, local people were pouring out their hearts, with a woman who had been 60 years in Slade Road saying that she no longer goes out at night because she is afraid so to do. I have heard the concern expressed by carers on Carers Rights Day, when 200 of them gathered together. There are none so noble as those who care, but they are finding it increasingly difficult because of the lack of support for them directly and because of the crisis in social care. All that is allied to the disastrous mishandling of Brexit, the impact of which is increasingly being felt where I was on Friday, at the Jaguar factory in my constituency. This jewel in the crown of manufacturing excellence has transformed the lives of thousands, but it now faces an uncertain future.

The Chancellor cracked all sorts of jokes in his Budget—he has a new found sense of humour. As our Amy used to say, “Dad, you should be on the stage.” There’s one leaving in half an hour.” There was a new found sense of humour, but the reality is that this was a bad joke Budget, because in terms of facing up to the challenges facing the people of Britain, it let the people of Britain down. It was the same old Tories; in the words of the Prime Minister herself, “Nothing has changed.”

5.42 pm

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate and to listen to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey). I do not agree with 99.9% of what he said but there was an element there with which I may have agreed. Steady as she goes is what the Government and the Budget have portrayed to the country, and in the circumstances that is eminently sensible. Sadly, we simply do not have the money, for the reasons many Conservative Members have explained, to splash out, as the Leader of the Opposition claims that he does.

Nobody has said that leaving the EU is going to be easy, but the people of this country voted to do so and that is what we must do. I have been longing to hear some cohesion in the House, with the majority of MPs, who voted to initiate article 50, getting behind the Prime Minister and our country to do all we can to get the best deal we can. Divided, we are not going to get the best deal because they see a divided country. The future for us when we leave the EU, particularly in business and other opportunities, is enormous.

I shall tell the House a little story. Lord Digby Jones came down to my constituency to attend the apprenticeship fair, which is now in its fifth year. I set it up with the
help of the local college, for which I give many thanks. He gave a speech. For those who do not know, let me say that he was a trade ambassador—I think he still is, actually—and he had been to India to meet up-and-coming businesses over there, as that country is going to be a huge powerhouse in the years ahead. He sat in the back of a taxi and he noticed the taxi driver’s eyes staring at him in the mirror. The taxi driver asked who he was and he said, “I’m Lord Jones. I’m a trade ambassador. Who are you?” The taxi driver gave his name and said that he had two sons, and Lord Jones said, “And what are your two sons doing?” He said, “They are at university. And I’m spending every waking minute in my car earning every penny I can to support them in their futures.” Lord Jones, with the eyes still fixed on him—of course, the car was still going straight down the road, we hope—said, “Where do you see your children in their futures?” Without pausing, the taxi driver said, “Where you’re sitting.” The point of my story is that there are tens of thousands of young people in the rising Asian economies who are so hungry—lean and mean—in the business sense—and they want a share of what we have had and of what we need to engender in this country. We have to get hungry, mean and lean again. Government Ministers can help enormously with that by following Conservative philosophy.

5.45 pm

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): This was not a serious Budget—and I am not referring to the bad jokes that littered the Chancellor’s speech and which were as weak as the Tory Government of the man who delivered them. Last Wednesday, my Opposition colleagues and I waited desperately for an hour to hear something that would help the people we represent to live a decent life. Instead, we got a Budget that includes more spending on an ultra-hard Brexit to appease the Conservative party, which will harm the country, than there was spending on the NHS. The improvements to universal credit were rising, but they are too little, too late. The relief from the reduction in the six-week wait is only minimal when compared with the thousands of pounds that many of the families dependent on benefits are set to lose.

The Government’s worst legacy by far must be the public sector pay cap. Cardiff North has 19,000 public sector workers—the highest proportion in Wales—and they really hoped that the Budget would end the disgraceful pay freeze that has seen nurses using food banks and care workers struggling to make ends meet. One thing we have learned to appreciate since the spring Budget is how desperately dependent we are on public services. The Chancellor’s Budget leaves public sector workers worse off than they were seven years ago. Austerity is not a policy choice: it is political.

Yesterday, the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy launched his industrial strategy to address weaknesses in the economy. The UK’s economy has been systematically underperforming on almost every key measure. Our productivity is down and we have the most geographically unbalanced economy in Europe. Part of the boost to productivity should be investment in renewables, which are set to be the backbone of our modern energy system. The plummeting cost of wind power means that onshore and offshore wind can help to improve the UK’s competitiveness and productivity. It is therefore hugely disappointing that the strategy does not set out how we can continue to support onshore wind, which is the cheapest of the new generation of energy production. We have yet to see an announcement on the Swansea tidal lagoon. That was a missed opportunity to invest in infrastructure for the future. With a cap on funding for renewables until 2025, the Government have shown they have a long way to go before they can deliver on clean growth.

Finally, I am frustrated about and fearful of the prospect of the financial impact of a shambolic Tory Brexit on the British and Welsh economy. The Budget includes £1 billion of additional capital funding for Wales, but more than half that must be repaid. The Budget is a missed opportunity. We needed to see one that truly transformed the economy, not more of the same.

5.48 pm

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) and to speak briefly about the Budget and its focus on the future successful economy that we need. The Budget is one of fair taxes, improving productivity, tackling our housing issues, supporting public services and making sure that we build the homes the country needs.

It is this Government who are tackling the gender pay gap. They are bringing forward T-levels and maths training, and Barton Peveril College and Eastleigh College in my constituency will be helping with that. They are increasing the personal tax allowance to nearly £12,000. They are freezing fuel duty and duty on beer, wine and spirits. They are embracing technology and establishing a new national creative industries policy, while also focusing on improving our environment. What is not to like about that?

Let us move on to house prices. One of the concerns most regularly voiced by my constituents is not only that they cannot afford a house, but that their children and even their grandchildren cannot afford a house or imagine a future that their parents had. Work done by this Government has saved nearly £2,000 on stamp duty for first-time buyers in my constituency. That will help to get people on to the housing ladder, which, a couple of years ago, would have been deemed simply unachievable, so my message to the Chancellor is: thank you.

My other message to the Chancellor is: please can we have the Botley bypass and the Chandlers Ford link road? As long as we work with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the new industrial strategy, those projects, dear Ministers, will not only help our productivity, but tackle local air pollution and the low productivity issue in the Solent. Those are real benefits for real people of all ages.

I must also thank the Chancellor for not raising air passenger duty, as that really matters to our regional airports. It is a testament to this Government that hard-working people are being supported to get on in life. My local paper highlights the fact that nearly 600 new jobs have been created in Hedge End and Chandlers Ford. This is a good Budget, which should be applauded and supported in this House. I look forward to walking through the Lobby in support of it and making sure that we deliver the technology, the productivity and the opportunities for Britain.
Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): On a positive note, I welcome the proposed tax on single-use plastic packaging. We know the huge environmental damage that is being done and, at the moment, there is little pressure on producers to reduce resource use and to make their packaging recyclable. It is left to local councils to clear up the mess and to local taxpayers to foot the bill.

I am afraid that that is about the only thing in the Budget that I feel inclined to welcome. Figures show that the public sector pay cap has reduced the disposable income of workers in my constituency by more than £45 million since 2010. Last week, I met representatives from the Royal College of Nursing to hear how low pay is causing a recruitment crisis: applications to study nursing have fallen by almost a quarter this year, at a time of acute staff shortages in the NHS. For nurses, who have seen a real-terms drop in their earnings of 14% since 2010, this Budget offered nothing.

What I am hearing from those charged with delivering essential public services in Bristol is that we simply cannot go on like this any longer. Bristol City Council is having to find more so-called savings worth £100 million over the next five years. Non-statutory services are being cut to the bone. What was particularly shameful was the complete failure by the Chancellor to mention social care, which accounts for close to a quarter of the council’s budget.

Avon and Somerset’s police and crime commissioner and chief constable were in Parliament last week. They did all they could when faced with Government demands for savings worth £66 million: modernising the way they conduct policing and streamlining their operations. They have been widely commended for the way in which they went about making those savings. Despite the loss of more than 600 officers since 2010, because of the cuts, neighbourhood policing was protected. The police and crime commissioner and chief constable said that the reward for all their work was to be told by the Government that they needed to come up with another £17 million of savings. They were here to tell Ministers that it simply cannot be done. They will not be able to provide the police service that the public expect and deserve if these cuts go ahead, but the Government are not listening to them, and there was not one mention of policing in the Budget.

Another example is St Brendan’s, a sixth-form college in my constituency, which was commended for its financial management by Ofsted in February. The principal is now telling me that he cannot go on like this. Sixth-form funding has been frozen at £4,000 per pupil since 2015—a real-term cut of more than £200. He is determined not to cut the curriculum, as many school sixth forms have been forced to do. This Government pay lip service to social mobility, but in truth they are squeezing young people’s life chances and denying them educational opportunities and the extra-curricular support they need.

The economic picture revealed by the Chancellor in his Budget shows us that austerity is not working. A braver Chancellor would have acknowledged that, put up his hand and admitted that he had chosen to invest in our councils, in our schools, in our colleges and in our nurses and police. The Budget was a failure.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I will focus my remarks on chapter 4 of the Budget, which is on productivity, because as it says in the Red Book, that is how we boost wages, improve living standards and improve overall prosperity across the nation. Incredibly, if we could close the productivity gap with Germany, we would increase our GDP by 33%. Competition is the key to improving productivity, and the Red Book states that boosting productivity makes businesses “more efficient”. I began my own experience in business at a time when most of my competitors were closing down. It was a few years later, when new competition came into the market, that we really raised our game and became more competitive, efficient and effective. The key to more competition is ensuring that we have a level playing field.

The first thing we need to deal with is access to finance, and the Budget deals with a number of different issues for people who cannot borrow from the high street lenders. Increasing productivity is about unlocking £20 billion of patient capital; doubling the enterprise investment scheme allowance, which certainly provides more capital for those early-stage and higher-risk businesses; and providing more support for challenger banks. Those measures tackle the issues of people who cannot borrow, but the reality is that many people in business will not borrow because they do not trust the high street banks.

We have seen some issues over the past few years, with scandals at the Royal Bank of Scotland Global Restructuring Group and other banks meaning that assets were often taken away from small businesses totally inappropriately; and those businesses have no recourse. We need an independent financial services tribunal, along the lines of employment tribunals. It is not just about the money; it is about the human cost of a life’s work being taken away. A tribunal would provide an independent means of redress for such businesses.

The Chancellor also mentioned the VAT threshold in his speech. He has not tackled that yet, but we do need to tackle it. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this is a barrier to productivity and expansion, and that has been supported by a report from the Office for Tax Simplification, which says that there is a bunching effect around the VAT threshold.

Finally, rebalancing the economy means more investment across the nation. There is too much focus on London. It is not just the Treasury doing this—in fact, it is not the Treasury. It is about access to private sector capital, and we need to find ways for the north also to access that private sector investment.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): This Budget had one redeeming feature: it was honest. It was honest about the weak growth prospects and how weak our economy is. I hope that the whole House will reflect on these dismal forecasts, because they have dramatic implications for our economy, people’s livelihoods, public finances and services, and the way in which we debate the issue of the day—namely, Brexit.

Look at what the Office for Budget Responsibility’s growth figures really mean for ordinary people and their incomes. Compared to the Budget just a year ago, it means that people will be earning £687 less by 2021. Wages in 2021 will still be lower—still buying less—than they did in 2008. The IFS talks about the danger of
Brexit. The OBR has told people the truth. They were not—it will be worse. They thought they were voting for an economy that will be better than before. They are going to get less. People who voted leave thought means that the Conservative Brexit is failing our economy in crime. The Budget will do nothing to tackle the criminals and to fight back against the big increase numbers down. The Budget will do nothing to tackle crime in time.

What does the Budget mean for Brexit politics? It means that the Conservative Brexit is failing our economy and failing our country. People who voted leave thought they were voting for better wages because there would be less competition from immigrants. Their wages are going to be lower. They thought they were voting for more money for our public services, such as the NHS. They are going to get less. They thought they were voting for an economy that will be better than before. They were not—it will be worse.

I say to the right hon. and hon. Gentlemen on the Treasury Bench that it is time they thought again about Brexit. The OBR has told people the truth.

6 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): This is my first time taking part in a Budget debate, and I would like to say some thank yous.

Thank you to my Conservative colleagues for the work they have already done on controlling the deficit, restoring the public finances and rebuilding a strong economy, so that we can afford the many measures we take today.

Thank you on behalf of young people. I remember that, under Labour, nearly 1 million young people were not in employment, not in education and not in training. Today, youth unemployment is at all-time lows.

Thank you for investing in skills and especially in maths. When I went to university, I was a very rare breed: a girl who did maths. Today, that breed is still too small. So, girls, listen: if you do maths and a science at A-level, you will earn 30% more than your peers. The £600 per pupil taking A-level maths that will go to each school can be transformational for this country.

Thank you for removing stamp duty for first-time buyers. It is hard to get on the property ladder in my constituency, and that will make a difference.

Thank you for listening on universal credit. We must help those most in need. Thank you especially for making it easier for the housing element of the benefit to go straight to the landlord. That is an idea I pitched to the Chancellor, and he had no tin ear.

Thank you for funding the NHS, and especially for underwriting the pay increases for our nurses and for investing in the capital budgets. I am glad that south and mid-Essex will be among the first to benefit.

But most of all, thank you for the support for innovation. I am proud to live in a country where there are 40 start-up businesses every hour—that is three a day in my constituency. I am proud that there are 28 great British start-ups that are now billion-dollar businesses. I am proud that this Government are investing more money in science and research than any other Government for the past 40 years, because scientists are the people who find real solutions to real problems, and they will build us a better future.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way? [HON. MEMBERS: “Oh.”] I will be very quick. Is my hon. Friend also thankful for the £21 million—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Two people cannot be stood at the same time.

Come on, Nusrat!

Ms Ghani: Is my hon. Friend also thankful for the extra £21 million that will be invested in science and tech, helping us to create the jobs of the future?

Vicky Ford: Absolutely, because we need to make sure that we invest in not only the ideas and the innovators but the skills, the people and the places.

Brexit is coming, and it does bring huge risks. Now, more than ever, is the time to back ideas, back the innovators, invest in our infrastructure and inspire our industry. I am very proud to be supporting this Budget.

6.3 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my near neighbour, the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), although I have to say that I do not find many people on the streets who echo her thanks to her colleagues quite so effusively.

Reading the comments of the OBR, it is hard to come to the conclusion that they are anything other than somewhat gloomy. I would suggest to Conservative Members that just one of the factors may have been the lack of an industrial strategy over the last seven years, so there is some welcome for the fact that we do now have an industrial strategy.

The city I represent has been mentioned many times, and I just want to make a couple of comments, particularly on life sciences. Cambridge has been tremendously successful. I am grateful to Savills for pointing out that, in terms of one measure—global bioscience venture capital funding per capita—Cambridge is streets ahead of all our international competitors and anywhere else in this country. But alongside the success stories that the Government trumpeted when they launched the strategy yesterday, I urge colleagues to look—I do not normally do this—at The Daily Telegraph: a couple of days ago it had a report that Johnson & Johnson, the major American healthcare giant, had pulled out of plans to build a new research and development facility in the UK, just outside Cambridge. It said those plans “have been put on hold over concerns that the UK is both politically and economically weak while negotiations to leave the European Union are ongoing”, so there is a mixed picture.
The missing element in all this is the people. The reason why these industries are successful in Cambridge is that people can come and go freely. In the context of Brexit, that will be a real challenge. In every lab I go to, I find people from other parts of the world, but they are leaving, and the next generation is not coming. The industrial strategy has to be seen in that context. What makes people come here? Good schools, but there is nothing in the Budget, as hon. Friends have pointed out, to improve schools, and most of all, there is nothing on housing.

Housing is complicated in Cambridge. The city council is doing a fantastic job; it is trying to build council housing, but it is dogged by Government policy changes. The council bravely bought itself out of the housing revenue account, only for the Government to change the strategy entirely a year later, completely undermining its policies. Yes, lifting the HRA cap would be good, but can we have any faith that that will continue over the next few months and years?

On the Oxford-Milton Keynes-Cambridge arc, it would be good to have more housing there, but look at the details in the Budget Book. There is talk about shifts from section 106 and the community infrastructure levy to a strategic infrastructure tariff. That is very complicated, detailed stuff, mirroring what happens in London. However, the governance arrangements on that arc are not one mayoralty; there is not one, unified structure there. This is complicated stuff, and it will not happen soon. The industrial strategy may be a very glossy, colourful document, but for most people, life is being lived in gritty black and white.

If only the Government would further devolve transport and give that power to Wales, so that we were in the same position as Scotland, we could successfully move ahead with electrification and increase the productivity of the Welsh economy. The whole of Wales has been let down by the refusal to electrify from Cardiff, let down by the refusal to sign off on the Swansea bay tidal lagoon and let down by the refusal further to devolve rail transport to Wales. Those constant refusals highlight that the Government are not interested in Wales, its future or, more importantly, the economy that is to provide the opportunities for young people in Wales to prosper.

6.9 pm

Gerard Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): This is a “nothing has changed” Budget from an out-of-touch Government enabled by Conservative Members who have no idea of the reality of people’s lives. In the midst of it all has been a battle between the SNP and the Scottish Conservatives to claim credit for the Chancellor’s climbdown on the VAT charges imposed on Scotland’s emergency services. As ever, the reality has been lost in the performance that has played out between them. I thought for a moment earlier that the hon. Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie) might break into song in his praise of the Scottish Government, but of course he failed to mention that growth in Scotland is even lower than it is in the UK.

The whole VAT situation could have been avoided if the SNP had listened to Unison’s advice at the time, although that is not to let the UK Government off the hook on the matter. It was wrong to impose charges on Scotland’s emergency services, and the Chancellor has admitted that with the Budget. It says very little for the persuasive powers of the Secretary of State for Scotland that the election of 12 new Scottish Tory MPs was seemingly required to convince the Chancellor to introduce the exemption.

Perhaps the new intake will bend the Chancellor’s ear once more and use their new-found influence to get back the £140 million that Scotland’s police and fire services have already paid in VAT. Surely, if it is wrong to pay it in 2018, it has been wrong to pay it all along. If that money is refunded to the Scottish Government, I hope that it will be ring-fenced. I know that my constituents do not want to have to repeat the successful local campaigns that they had to launch to save police stations in Rutherglen, Cambuslang and Blantyre from the threat of closure. That additional funding for the emergency services is much needed.

The Budget also failed to address the misery that is being caused by the Government’s social security programme. The move from an initial six-week wait to a five-week wait for universal credit payment will be cold comfort to the people who contact my office in desperate need of help. Some of them tell my staff that they feel suicidal, because the Government are driving them into debt and they have nowhere else to turn. What must it be like for them to spend Christmas worrying about whether they will have a roof over their head or food to put on the table? Here is an opportunity for the Government to get two things right amid this woeful Budget: backdate the VAT refund for the Scottish emergency services and pause the roll-out, to fix universal credit.
6.11 pm

**Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): I declare an interest as an elected member of Gateshead Council.

I want to speak about what is not in this Budget, because those things are important to my constituents in Blaydon, many of whom are struggling to cope with daily life and supporting their families. First, I want to mention the absence of any reference to social care. We all know that the demand for social care is growing, and we know from experience that it is essential that people have access to high-quality social care when they need it, but the Government continue to cut the local authority budgets that go towards providing that support.

In my council of Gateshead, we spend more than half our budget on the most vulnerable adults and children. Our funding has been cut by 52% since 2010, and the number of people who use and need our services is rising. I checked the Tory manifesto earlier and found this on long-term care:

“Where others have failed to lead, we will act.”

But there is no action on social care in this Budget.

There is nothing in this Budget for education, other than for maths teaching. Maths teaching is, of course, hugely important, but many of our schools are struggling to balance their budget so that they can provide the best education possible for our young people, and despite changes to the schools funding formula over the summer, 91% of schools still face a real-terms reduction in their budgets as per pupil funding has reduced. We may have a commitment to maths funding, but increasing pupil numbers and increasing demands versus decreasing funding means that the sums do not add up for schools.

On housing, we had a raft of measures that the Chancellor says will increase house building, but the announcements fall far short of a proper plan to help to fix the housing crisis. We need all councils to build again to create the houses we need.

I heard the Chancellor repeat this morning that the public sector pay cap has gone. But NHS workers, who were specially mentioned by the Chancellor, will receive an increase only on condition that they increase productivity by renegotiating their terms and conditions under “Agenda for Change”. This does not just affect the NHS; for staff right across the public sector, work has increased and pay has fallen in real terms. The Government need not only to lift the cap that they imposed, but to fund the NHS, local government, fire and rescue services, the police, education, the delivery of universal credit and many other areas to give those staff the rise that they need, without further reducing services.

6.14 pm

**Margaret Greenwood** (Wirral West) (Lab): This Budget has failed to deliver for our vital public services and our families, and it has failed to step up to the very serious challenge posed by climate change.

Pupils and teachers in our schools are feeling the squeeze of Tory austerity, with increased class sizes, a crisis in teacher retention and a reduced curriculum offer. Education is the key to our future, yet the Budget had nothing for school budgets. The Government announced extra funding for maths teaching, which is fine, but we will not be able to draw on all the talents of our young people unless we address the neglect of arts education under this Government. Arts subjects are important for the development of the individual, as well as for our cultural offer of film, television, theatre, music, art and dance, which are all significant for the economy. Labour would abolish university tuition fees, but there was no money in this Budget to do that. Individuals are leaving university with an average of £57,000 of debt, but there is no sense in leaving people to carry such a burden.

Our communities are feeling the impact of seven years of Tory austerity, with huge cuts to our police services. Merseyside police has lost 1,000 officers since 2010. My constituents are concerned about antisocial behaviour in areas where there have never previously been any problems. The first duty of any Government is to keep their people safe, yet under the Conservatives, we have lost 20,000 police officers from our streets. When we consider the fire service it is the same story. Funding for fire services up to 2019-20 was set in a four-year settlement announced in February 2016. It meant cuts each year for Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service, putting firefighters and the communities they serve at risk. It is very disappointing that the Government have failed to revisit the funding for those services. Both fire stations in my constituency are closing as a direct result of central Government cuts, which will mean longer waits at fires and road traffic accidents, and the loss of precious minutes in life and death situations.

There is also the Government’s failure to deliver on the NHS. The extra £1.6 billion of funding does not meet the £4 billion that the Chief Executive of NHS England has called for. The Health Foundation and the Nuffield Trust agree that that amount is needed to prevent patient care from deteriorating. It also does not match the £6 billion that Labour would commit. Providing more money for the NHS is only part of the answer to the problems in services. It was notable that the Chancellor failed to give any money to tackle the crisis in social care funding, despite the fact that Members on both sides of the House recognise that there is such a crisis, with 1 million people not having their needs met.

There was also precious little to address the very serious threat of climate change, so this Government are delivering a Budget that is a huge disappointment. They are in denial about the seriousness of the problems caused by austerity. The Government do not have the vision to understand the value of a broad educational offer, and they are failing to be ambitious in taking the action we need to address climate change.

6.16 pm

**Tony Lloyd** (Rochdale) (Lab): The huge gulf across the Chamber between Government Members’ world of disbelief and Opposition Members’ world of reality mirrors how modern Britain is divided. Ministers are looking astonished, but Britain is a very divided society. The rich are doing extraordinarily well, but many other people are struggling. Public sector workers will once again have another year of pay cuts, and there is no money to fund any realistic investment in our public services. The police in Greater Manchester have been cut by 2,000 officers. There is less money for our local authorities, and in Rochdale, where social care and children’s services have been decimated by this Government, there has been no relief whatsoever.

I want to concentrate on productivity, which this Government claim they intend to make the keynote of this Budget. Let us look at the reality of what is taking
place for those with intermediate skills. Rochdale, like many other towns across the north of England, needs investment in education and training, but what have we seen? Let me take Meanwood Primary School. It is a great school with great teachers, but this Government are putting the “Mean” into Meanwood because the school, despite the rhetoric of Conservative Members, has faced cuts this year. It has lost a teacher and teaching assistant hours. In effect, the school has been made worse for children from some of the most deprived parts of my constituency, which cannot be right. The further education college has been damaged by cuts. The figure of £4,000 per pupil has been consistent over the years but, de facto, that means cut after cut, and the real number of hours per student is far less than in almost any other OECD country. Intermediate skills are simply not being invested in as they should be.

I challenge this Government. Rochdale needs a Rochdale education challenge, just as there was a London challenge under the previous Labour Government. It is now up to this Government to get real and to have the ambition to change this nation. Quite frankly, given the complacency of Conservative Members, it is hard to believe that this Government can have the ambition that the people of this country deserve, so it is about time that they went and we had a Labour Government to show such ambition.

6.19 pm

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): No party has a monopoly on damaging people’s faith in politics and in government, but I genuinely believe that the Budget could do significant further damage to people’s faith in the ability of the political process to deliver for them. That is not so much because of what is in the Budget, as because of the huge mismatch between the scale of the economic challenge facing the country and the behemoth of Brexit coming down the track, and the sense of a lack of grip and lack of ambition in the Budget to deal with any of those things. That is combined with some truly extraordinary contributions from Government Members, who talk about the Budget as if it is a genuinely transformative experience for the country. That is simply not the lived experience of many of our constituents. It does the Conservative party no favours to pretend that we are in that situation.

Briefly, given the time I have left, I will look at how my constituents will feel let down by the Budget. Once again, WASPI women get nothing and Cumbria’s infrastructure needs are ignored. For people in Furness and across the country, wage growth has not kept up with increases in living costs for years, and that will potentially be true for another decade. The public are sick to the back teeth of austerity measures being imposed with no end in sight.

The rest of my remarks will focus on the most ominous omission from the Budget speech and almost entirely from the Budget documents: defence. On the face of it, there are continuing increases in the defence budget, but it is no accident that the Chancellor—a former Secretary of State for Defence—chose to ignore defence completely. He knows and the Government know about the terrible crunch in the defence equipment programme and the amount of damage that may be done in the coming months, let alone years, by the way in which our nation’s resources are being starved. There may be no way back from that and the Government must pay heed.

6.21 pm

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): This Budget was guided by the political considerations of the Tory party, rather than the day-to-day reality faced by my constituents in Hampstead and Kilburn. It was well briefed before the Budget that the Chancellor’s hands would be tied, but I refuse to accept that Brexit allows for a total cop-out and a Budget that is so utterly feeble in confronting London’s problems.

In the short time I have, I will focus on education and policing. The Red Book reveals worrying cuts for school buildings and says next to nothing about concerning signs over the Government’s childcare promises. I want answers on why the Budget statement did not include a single mention of counter-terrorism in a year when we have seen five terrorist attacks, four of them in the capital. I want answers on the total failure to acknowledge the immense financial strain that our police are under. The omission of police funding is simply scandalous. Today, I want to provide a voice for those in my corner of north-west London who are concerned by rising crime on our streets, the continued terror threat and the Government’s utter failure to compromise with the Met commissioner and the Mayor of London.

Capital investment in schools is crucial, yet the small print of the Budget reveals that over the next four years, there will be £1 billion less in the Department for Education’s capital budget than was outlined in the Chancellor’s spring Budget. The Chancellor failed to announce that at the Dispatch Box, but local parents and pupils will lose out as a result. The verdict of headteachers in my constituency could not be clearer. My local paper, the Camden New Journal, published an open letter to the Chancellor signed by 41 school heads saying:

“We cannot see how we will be able to continue to provide our current level of provision in the future with such drastic cuts to our funding.”

The absence of early years funding from the Budget is similarly concerning. As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on childcare and early education, it has been a privilege to hear from colleagues from across the House about their experiences of the roll-out of the 30 hours of childcare policy. In principle, getting parents back to work and ensuring that every child has the best start in life is something that unites us. However, as I wrote in my letter to the Minister for Children and Families last week, the policy is underfunded. As was revealed in the latest Ofsted figures, more than 1,000 nurseries and childminders have gone out of business since 2010.

On police funding, I will echo the Mayor of London’s response to the Budget last week in the short time I have left. Given the cuts of £600 million since 2010 and the fact that we are set to lose another £400 million before 2020, I wonder at what point the Government will stop compromising the safety of Londoners.

6.24 pm

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): This is my first Budget, so I was geared up for tweeting furiously, poring over Budget papers and analysing it in
the local media, but it is striking how little of any of those things I have had to do, because the Budget represents an incredible lack of anything at all for my city of Nottingham and my constituency.

The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), who is no longer in the Chamber, termed the Budget as “not exactly a non-event”, and he meant that as a compliment: there was just above nothing in the Budget, and that for him was a good thing. For my constituency, only a grade above a non-event is not good enough. On the issues that really matter to us, such as decent wages, a fair benefits system, healthcare, schools, transport, community safety and so on; on the things that are making people’s everyday lives more difficult than they ought to be; and on the issues leaving children in working families in poverty with no way out — on all these things – we feel let down by the Government, and the Budget is emblematic of that failure.

Another incredible omission was the fact that the east midlands was not referenced at all. Treasury stats show that, whether it is transport investment or infrastructure investment in general, the east midlands will always come last, and once again the Budget and the industrial strategy do nothing to fix that. After the cancellation of the midland main line electrification, we are in desperate need of more money for our transport links, but that has not come. It is not just for getting to and from the capital that we need midland main line electrification; this is also about east-west connectivity. Both those things have excellent business cases and are crying out for a bit of vision to support them.

It is not a coincidence that today’s Social Mobility Commission report has the east midlands as the region with the worst outcomes for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, but we know that that is not inevitable. The poverty profile of my constituency is similar to a number in London, but while 17 out of 20 mobility hotspots are in London, none is in the east midlands. My area is one of the coldspots, and that is because of the level of investment into the community. I say that not because I want London’s investment for Nottingham; I want investment levelled up, because it works. It is good for society and for the Exchequer. That shows what we should expect from the Budget, but instead we have something that is not quite a non-event which, frankly, is not quite good enough. In fact, it is not good enough at all.

6.27 pm

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this important debate on the Chancellor’s autumn Budget, which has truly exposed the appalling reality of the Tory party’s failed austerity experiment. The UK economy is now forecast to be £72 billion smaller than under the spring 2016 forecast, and average earnings are not expected to recover to pre-crisis levels until 2025.

In a major shift in their assessment of the UK’s growth outlook, the OBR has forecast that growth will remain below trend until 2022. This is the first time in recorded economic history that growth projections have been so low. That in turn significantly weakens the UK’s fiscal position, because it reduces revenue forecasts, household incomes and therefore the ability to reduce the deficit, which let us not forget was the Tory party’s primary test of economic success on coming into government in 2010. That now will not happen until 2031.

The reality could not be more stark now: austerity is a vicious cycle of self-defeating decline. Real wages are lower than they were in 2010, and the Budget confirmed a further hit to living standards, with disposable income set to fall in 2017. Working age benefits have been frozen since 2015. Meanwhile, prices measured by CPI have risen by 6.9%. Under this Government, it is clear that the poor are getting ever poorer, while an increasing share of national wealth flows to the richest in our society. That is a betrayal of my generation, which is the first in recorded history in which people are seeing their living standards falling below those of their parents.

The key reason for this downward revision in growth was the major shift in the OBR’s outlook for productivity. In the past, its prediction was that productivity growth would return to pre-crisis rates, but it now believes that the slowdown is evidence of structural weakness. That structural weakness is a result of the Government’s self-defeating policies, which have created a cycle of weak earnings and cheap labour, with firms using low-cost labour rather than investing in more efficient processes and plant that would drive productivity growth.

The industrial strategy White Paper that was published yesterday demonstrates that the Conservatives have once again missed the opportunity to take the radical action that is needed to meet the UK’s productivity challenge. Raising research and development investment to 2.4% of GDP by 2027 will only bring the UK in line with the OECD average, after years of lagging behind, but we need to be above the average, not below it. World leaders such as South Korea and Japan spend over 3% of their GDP. That is why Labour is committed to that target.

There is the key question of ensuring that UK firms are leading this effort and that it is balanced across all UK regions. In Scotland, for example, 70% of R and D activity is undertaken by overseas-owned companies, but there is nothing in the industrial strategy to address that. The country stands on the cusp of a great disruptive opportunity as the fourth industrial revolution emerges, but this lacklustre Budget and industrial strategy prove beyond doubt that the Government are simply not up to the huge economic challenges facing the country. Only the Labour party has the true ambition and vision to harness our nation’s industrial potential.

6.29 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): As we have just heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), we are on the cusp of the fourth industrial revolution, but if we are to be ready for it, we must do more than this industrial strategy does. The Britain of five to 20 years from now will look very different from the country in which we live and work today. If we are to ensure that new technology does not lead to higher levels of underemployment and a workforce whose skills have become obsolete, we must first ensure that automation leads to innovation. If Britain is to be a world leader in new technology, as the Government contend, we must think bigger and be bolder.

Our economy has drifted from manufacturing to the financial and service sectors. Between 1978 and 2017, the number of service sector jobs rose by more than 20%. That shift was highlighted by representatives of a civil engineering firm in my constituency who told me that, although demand for their services was increasing,
[Alex Sobel]

recruiting staff with relevant skills was becoming increasingly difficult. I welcome the £64 million investment in retraining that is mentioned in the White Paper, but, in the context of £1.5 billion worth of cuts in the adult skills budget, it hardly scratches the surface of the investment that is needed to end a skills shortage that will hamper any serious industrial strategy.

We should aim to create an energy revolution by taking steps such as reforming ownership of the grid, including common, state and mutual forms of ownership. That will open the energy market to smaller companies, and will create a more competitive market. We need look no further than Leeds, where we created White Rose Energy. We also need an insulation revolution that gives not just homeowners but landlords and housing associations incentives to insulate their houses, so that we can save energy, create jobs and provide warmer, safer houses.

I am pleased that there is to be some investment in infrastructure for electric vehicles, but the Government need to listen to the Industrial Strategy Commission’s recommendation that infrastructure investment should be universal. My constituency does not have a single public charge point. How shameful is that? We also need to take more urgent action to tackle climate change. I urge the Government to listen to Labour Members and to commit to themselves to ensuring that 60% of the UK’s energy comes from low-carbon or renewable sources by 2030.

We need a Government who will think bigger. We need a Government who show a commitment to our planet and the health of future generations. We need a Government who are not afraid to be bold and invest in this country and its people. As Britain looks to a future outside the European Union, it has never been more crucial to embrace change and lead the world, not only in producing and welcoming new technology, but in shaping our society to ensure that change works for the many, not the few.

6.32 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): This is the Budget that was trailed as the “Ruth” Budget for Scotland, and it is the Budget that the Scottish Tories have apparently stepped up to the plate and delivered for Scotland, so let us look at what they have delivered. They claim credit for the VAT exemption for the police and fire services. The SNP raised that in the Chamber 63 times and forced a vote on it, so we have clearly led the way. The Scottish Tories do not even seem to care about the need for a refund of the £140 million that has already been stolen.

What else have the Scottish Tories delivered? Nothing. Not one original idea in the Budget can be credited to them. We are still left with a rail budget that has been cut by £600 million in real terms, and with no Ayshire growth deal. There was nothing about the £200 million CAP convergence uplift that was meant for Scotland and nothing about renewable energy, and we are faced with a real-terms revenue budget cut of half a billion pounds over the next two years. The 10 Democratic Unionist Members who still sit on the Opposition Benches managed to get a £1.5 billion package for a couple of key votes, and we are meant to believe that they are a solid voting lobby.

There was one welcome measure for the oil and gas industry in relation to the transferable tax history, but, as is pointed out in paragraph 3.54 of the Red Book, the idea was first mooted in a Government paper in 2014, so it is certainly nothing to do with Scottish Tories. The fact that it is predicted to bring in £70 million makes it an easy decision for the Treasury anyway.

Today’s theme may be the future economy, but that future economy has already been curtailed by the £30 billion of tax giveaways in the last Budget—£30 billion that could have been spent more wisely. The incoherent policies continue with the flagship announcement of a £3.2 billion stamp duty giveaway that is now predicted to do no more than increase house prices and bring nothing for the Treasury bung. While increasing the pay gap for the young, the Government think that they can woo young voters back with the promise of a railcard, but paragraph 4.46 suggests that it will be funded by other rail users rather than the Treasury. Tuition is free in Scotland, but the Tories think that freezing fees at £9,250 per annum will bring young voters flocking back to them. I say to them that they are aff their heids.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Three minutes to speak is not long, but it is about the same time as it normally takes a Tory Budget to unravel. I wish to focus first on the automotive sector. Ellesmere Port is home to Vauxhall Motors, and we had several requests for the Budget to improve the competitiveness of the plant, but I am sorry to say that none of them appears to have made it into the Budget. We have heard a lot of talk about how we are lagging behind in terms of productivity, and one of the asks I had was about changing the way that business rates operate and currently act as a disincentive to invest in certain types of plant and machinery.

On the housing announcements, expanding the ability of local authorities to borrow against housing revenue accounts is welcome, but it is far from clear who will be able to bid for that extra borrowing capacity, with it being apparently only available to areas with what are termed as “high affordability pressures”. I do not know of any local authority that does not have a significant waiting list, so rather than make councils jump through hoops, should not this facility be available to any council that thinks it can take on the extra borrowing?

The stamp duty offer for first-time buyers attracted a lot of attention on the day of the Budget, but its coverage was inversely proportionate to the impact it will actually have. As we know from the OBR, the concern is that it will do nothing more than increase upward pressure on house prices. Indeed, five years ago a stamp duty holiday for first-time buyers was abandoned by the coalition Government because it had been “ineffective”. We are already seeing developers take advantage—“You and Yours” reported yesterday that developers have pocketed the stamp duty savings where they had an agreement with purchasers to stand the cost of stamp duty.

Surely the best use of taxpayers’ money in housing is to increase supply. One way to increase supply would be to help all those people who have ended up with an unsellable house because they were duped into buying a leasehold property. Coming up with a scheme to release people from that trap might do much to increase housing supply, and it would also be the right thing to do.
Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): As a nation, we have been socialised to think of the economy in abstract terms. It is analysed as a distant entity that needs to be served, slavishly, to keep the big, scary beast from collapse. When we hear the Chancellor tell us that inequality has narrowed, that there are more people in work and that our public services are protected, we could almost believe him. That is, if we did not actually speak to very real people outside the Westminster bubble. We could suspend disbelief if we never spoke to any workers or reflected on what is happening in our communities.

Every time Government Members cheer about the new jobs on the Government’s watch without any critical analysis of the nature of those jobs—short-term, insecure and low-wage—they lose credibility. On behalf of my community in North West Durham, I must convey extreme disappointment and anger at the Budget. Aside from the pantomime proceedings, it offered nothing to my community.

I shall give one example in illustration—the stamp duty giveaway. In the north-east, average house prices for first-time buyers are £125,591. That would mean a tiny giveaway of £11.82. Please forgive those people who have endured seven years of pay freezes—a typical prison officer, for example, who is now only £30 better off now than seven years ago—if they do not jump with joy at those announcements.

We need something completely different. We must be brave enough to say that borrowing is necessary for investment and that people must have a wage that they can live on—it is not fine to pay them a minimum wage that keeps them in starvation. I have met people who have been broken by this system and it is not their fault. The global banking crisis was not their fault. The recession was not their fault. The rules and traps of the system were not of their making.

To see the tears of grown working women and men flow directly as a result of Government policy tells me that we need a complete overhaul of our economic system. If the Government are not brave enough to do that, they must move over. If the economy does not work for everyone, it is not worthy.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): The measure of the Budget must surely be the promises that the Conservatives made to the British people over and again during the election campaign in June. They promised the British people a strong economy that would deliver investment in our public services. The Budget reveals just how badly the Government are letting down the British people and just how high the costs of the Government’s botched and divided process are proving to be. Instead of the strong economy that was promised, we see a forecast of poor productivity, falling living standards. They are running to stand still, but the best that the Chancellor can offer is that by 2025 average wages will have reached the same levels as in 2008. And instead of committing to the £350 million a week for the NHS promised by his colleagues in the Vote Leave campaign, the Chancellor is committing more taxpayers’ money to fund the cost of Brexit than he is to our NHS.

It is on the NHS that I wish to focus the remainder of my remarks today, as the scale of the financial challenges facing it makes the Budget look like a sticking plaster on a gaping wound. We are approaching the most pressurised time of year for the NHS, and its hard-working staff are approaching the winter in fear and trepidation because the pressures under which they are already working absorb all the resilience and reserves they can muster. The local hospital in my constituency is King’s College Hospital. Prior to 2010, King’s was performing well and was financially stable, but when I contacted it recently on behalf of a constituent who had spent five days waiting on a trolley to be allocated a bed on a ward, I was told that the hospital was more than 100% full. King’s is an exceptional place full of exceptional people, but it is being asked by this Government to deliver the impossible.

The performance of our NHS is inextricably linked to the performance of social care services, yet the Budget made no mention at all of social care. Funding sufficient high-quality social care would be the single most transformative measure that the Government could introduce for our NHS. The failure of this Budget on social care is just one of the many ways in which the Government continue to disadvantage women, who make up the overwhelming majority of hard-pressed carers, both paid and unpaid. It is one of the many ways in which the Budget is failing people up and down the country.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): After seven years of Conservative-led Government and seven years of austerity, my constituents in rural Derbyshire will tell this House that austerity is not working. Both our hospitals are facing closure. Three nurseries have already closed, and more are saying that they cannot continue. Schools are being squeezed by 5% cuts and saying that they cannot continue and are having to lose teachers. We have lost more than 400 police officers in Derbyshire. There are not enough to respond to serious incidents; there are not even enough to police Buxton carnival. And our firefighters are being squeezed by 5% cuts and saying that they cannot continue. Schools are being squeezed by 5% cuts and saying that they cannot continue and are having to lose teachers. We have lost more than 400 police officers in Derbyshire. There are not enough to respond to serious incidents; there are not even enough to police Buxton carnival. And our firefighters have been reduced to a retained service.

Austerity is hitting us hard—it is hitting every community hard—but it is not working. After seven years of telling us that we must not borrow to invest in public services, the Conservatives are borrowing up to the hilt. The national debt clock, which they were so keen to talk about at the time of the 2010 election, now stands at £1.95 trillion. They have almost doubled the national debt, and what have we got to show for it? We have public services that are on their knees. We have public servants who cannot afford a house. We have millions of people on benefits visiting food banks. That is an absolute disgrace.

We in the Labour party believe that we should borrow, but that we should borrow to invest. We should borrow to invest in our economy, in our public services, in our workers, in our jobs and in our communities. Then we would see an economy that could grow. People would be able to spend in their local businesses, and businesses would be able to thrive. Communities would be able to prosper once again. Instead, all that this Budget has offered us is more of the same—more of the same cuts
and more of the same poverty—and we ain’t seen nothing yet. The little Red Book has shown that we are just at the start of those cuts. We have another four years of freezes to benefits and school budgets, and cuts to our police, to our hospitals and to the NHS communities. That is what is happening. This Budget was a chance for the Government to come up with big new ideas, but they did not. This Government need to make way for one that can.

6.44 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): As the Chancellor gave his Budget speech last week, there was a collective groan across the country not just at the bad jokes, but at the content of the most uneventful Budget speech of recent times. There was no game-changing investment announcement and no lasting solutions for the growing difficulties facing our country. The Chancellor’s speech personified this Government: out of touch, inconsistent and directionless.

The Cabinet is morbidly and irrevocably split on Brexit and, rather than focusing on their individual briefs, Ministers now spend their days attempting to steal each others’ The International Trade Secretary wants to run Britain’s foreign policy. The Environment Secretary is learning all about hypothecation, apparently fancying himself as Chancellor, and The Times reported that he is busy researching the difference between a J curve and a J-cloth. Meanwhile, the Foreign Secretary continues to scheme for the top job. He is the first to praise the Prime Minister, while constantly plotting to undermine her—Iago on steroids. Ironically, the only person who does not want to be in No. 10 is its current occupant. She remains, as in the Monty Python parrot sketch, nailed to the perch and “off the twig”. The Prime Minister’s metabolic processes are, politically speaking, history.

The most important announcements made last week were not the Chancellor’s recycled policies, but those from the Office for Budget Responsibility. The OBR lowered UK growth forecasts, business investment, productivity rates and wage growth for the next five years, blowing a hole in the Government’s economic credibility. As for balancing the books, under the Government’s current projection, the UK budget will not be in surplus until 2030 at the earliest—a full 15 years after the former Chancellor said that the deficit would be eradicated. Workers who have already endured a decade of stagnant wages and lost earnings will not see their pay return to pre-crisis levels until 2025. And there is more. UK households face the biggest squeeze in disposable income since records began. The message from the OBR is clear: Britain under the Tories is now facing a record 17-year downturn in pay.

The Budget did nothing to eradicate the impact of austerity on women, who have disproportionately borne the brunt of it. The abolition of stamp duty for first-time buyers is of course welcome, but the OBR rightly points out that the move will increase house prices. Many Government Back-Benchers called for action to help the next generation, but the best the Chancellor could muster was a millennial railcard that young people cannot even use to commute to work and that will not even cover the cost of the 3.6% rail fare increase next year.

On universal credit, the Government finally listened to Labour and scrapped the seven-day waiting time, but they have done nothing about the roll-out.

The Government once again ensured that the NHS and its staff will remain underfunded and underpaid, and the extra money announced in the Budget does not even meet NHS England’s call for extra funding. Far from being dead and buried, the public sector pay cap remains alive and well. Public sector pay is now set to fall to its lowest level by comparison with the private sector, and the Chancellor is trying to divide public sector workers.

As I have said so many times at this Dispatch Box, the UK’s economic growth wholly depends on our ability to raise productivity rates, and there was nothing of any substance whatsoever in the Budget to help that. The Government continue to fail in delivering the infrastructure and investment that the regions so desperately need. Like so many of this Government’s policies, their industrial strategy White Paper released yesterday is thin on details and thinner on ideas—another damp squib. It is about time that this Government went. They should pack their bags, get the Prime Minister out of No. 10 and hand things over to the Labour party to do the job properly and get growth buck for this country.

6.48 pm

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): We have had an excellent debate this afternoon. We heard my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy lay out an optimistic vision for our industrial strategy. We heard my hon. Friends the Members for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), for Mansfield (Ben Bradley), for Dudley South (Mike Wood) and for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) and my hon. and learned Friend the Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer) talking about the positive measures in the Budget on skills, housing and tax. We also heard the usual fiction and portents of doom from the Opposition. I repudiate the Opposition’s predictions. Our destiny is not preordained. We have the power to shape the future and to boost our growth and productivity. If we want to know what high productivity looks like, we need look no further than our high-growth companies. When it comes to start-ups, we are world leading, with more than 650,000 companies founded in 2016 alone. We have more than twice the number of $1 billion tech companies than anywhere else in Europe. By enabling companies to grow and, even more, to start, we can make sure all people in this country benefit from our world leadership in areas such as driverless cars and artificial intelligence.

The real revolutionaries in this country are not sitting on the Opposition Front Bench clutching their iPads and looking up debt numbers, while denouncing enterprise; the real revolutionaries are the businesses across Britain that take risks, create jobs and improve our lives. They are the people who are delivering day out, day in for our country. This Budget is about liberating those businesses to achieve their ambitions and to deliver for our future, and it is about making sure that they have the people, the capital and the space to succeed.

Of course we want to attract the brightest and best to our country, which is why we are doubling the number of high-skilled visas that can be granted each year, but we also need to unleash the talents of our own people,
both to help power the economy and to make sure they can share in the opportunities that enterprise brings. The fact is that the previous Labour Government let down our children and young people. They left Britain short of skills; they dumbed down the curriculum; they created rampant grade inflation; they failed on technical education; and they left office with rising youth unemployment.

When Labour left office, youth unemployment was at 20%, which is why we brought in higher standards for English and maths, new academies and free schools, and new T-levels. Under this Government, we have seen more apprenticeships and the lowest level of youth unemployment for 13 years. I suggest the Opposition engage with the facts.

We are announcing even more in this Budget. We are tripling the number of computer science teachers and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) pointed out, we are giving schools £600 for every additional student studying maths A-level or core maths, the most valuable qualifications in the jobs market. We are learning from the best in the world, and I am delighted that my right hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards is here today because he championed the Shanghai and Singapore maths mastery programme that we are rolling out to a further 3,000 schools. We are also making sure that adults already in jobs have the opportunity to improve their skills through the national retraining scheme.

The Government know that private investment in high-growth businesses benefits us all through new technology, higher living standards and more jobs. This year, a record £2 billion was invested in FinTech alone. This Budget builds on that success by unlocking more than £20 billion of investment to finance growth in innovative firms. As my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman) said, £1 billion is also being invested in the life sciences sector.

We also want to make it easier for brilliant women founders to access capital. Research shows that, when making identical pitches, women are half as likely to secure early-stage investment, despite investors who invest in female-led businesses being, on average, more successful. We have asked the British Business Bank to look at that so we can see more brilliant women founders and start-ups getting that investment.

Finally, these high-potential businesses need space to grow and high-quality infrastructure. We are making it easier for businesses to expand their operations through new planning freedom and manufacturing zones. We are also investing a huge amount in infrastructure. As my hon. Friend the Member for Saffron Walden (Mrs Badenoch) pointed out, this Budget includes the highest amount any Government have spent as a proportion of GDP on economic infrastructure for 40 years. How can the Opposition talk about a lack of investment in infrastructure, given that this is the highest for 40 years? It is much higher than anything that happened under the previous Labour Government. This spending includes plans for the Oxford-Milton Keynes-Cambridge corridor and for the northern powerhouse. Let me say to the Opposition that we are investing £337 million in a new fleet of trains for the Tyne and Wear Metro, and £300 million to ensure HS2 can accommodate future northern and midlands rail services. We are also creating a £1.7 billion transforming cities fund, which will give our great cities the investment they need, and they will be able to invest in local trams or light rail systems as they see fit.

**Sir Edward Davey:** Does the right hon. Lady agree that British companies—our new entrepreneurial companies—would like a nice big market to sell their goods to, on our doorstep?

**Elizabeth Truss:** Absolutely, which is why our focus is on getting the best possible deal in the Brexit negotiations. Maintaining a tight grip on Government finances is, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) pointed out, vital for any Government, and Opposition Front Benchers would do well to look at that when they are considering—

—[Interruption.] I can see that the shadow Chancellor is on his iPad looking up what the—[Interruption.] I can help him out without an iPad. His plans would mean an additional half a trillion pounds-worth of debt. If hon. Members want to know how much extra interest the British public would have to pay every year, I can tell them that it is £7 billion. I do not need an iPad to know that.

This Government are prioritising our country’s long-term growth prospects. We are investing in the infrastructure and in the skills that our country needs to succeed. Whatever the Opposition say, it is not politicians or Whitehall that will turbo-charge our economy and bring the growth and improved living standards we all want; it is the enterprises up and down the country that are going to deliver that. The Opposition want to tax new industry to the hilt or, even worse, to run it themselves. I cannot think of a more scary prospect for businesses across Britain. We take the opposite view; we want to unleash enterprise and to make sure that businesses have the people, space and the conditions to succeed. This is a Budget that recognises where the true value of our economy is created. It is not through issuing blank cheques that we cannot afford, but by making sure that our enterprises have the skills, talent and space that they need to grow and to ensure that all our citizens benefit from our powerhouse future. That is why the House should support the Budget in the Lobby tonight.

**Question put and agreed to.**

**Resolved,**

That income tax is charged for the tax year 2018-19.

And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

**Mr Speaker:** I am now required under Standing Order No. 51(3) to put successively, without further debate, the Question on each of the Ways and Means motions numbered 2 to 44, on which the Bill is to be brought in. These motions are set out in a separate paper distributed with today’s Order Paper.

I must inform the House that, for the purposes of Standing Order No. 83U, with which I feel sure all colleagues are personally and closely familiar, and on the basis of material put before me, I have certified that in my opinion the following founding motions published on 22 November 2017 and to be moved by the Chancellor of the Exchequer relate exclusively to England, Wales and Northern Ireland and are within devolved legislative competence: motion 3, on income tax (main rates);
motion 35, on stamp duty land tax (higher rates for additional dwellings); and motion 36, on stamp duty land tax (relief for first-time buyers). Should the House decide on any of these motions it will be subject to double-majority voting.

The Speaker put forthwith the Questions necessary to dispose of the motions made in the name of the Chancellor of the Exchequer (Standing Order No. 51(3)).

2. CORPORATION TAX  
(CARGE FOR FINANCIAL YEAR 2019)  
Resolved.  
That (notwithstanding anything to the contrary in the practice of the House relating to the matters that may be included in Finance Bills) provision may be made taking effect in a future year charging corporation tax for the financial year 2019.

3. INCOME TAX (MAIN RATES)  
Resolved.  
That for the tax year 2018-19 the main rates of income tax are as follows—  
(a) the basic rate is 20%,  
(b) the higher rate is 40%;  
(c) the additional rate is 45%.  
And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

4. INCOME TAX  
(DEFAULT AND SAVINGS RATES)  
Resolved.  
(1) That for the tax year 2018-19 the default rates of income tax are as follows—  
(a) the basic rate is 20%,  
(b) the higher rate is 40%;  
(c) the additional rate is 45%.  
(2) That for the tax year 2018-19 the savings rates of income tax are as follows—  
(a) the basic rate is 20%,  
(b) the higher rate is 40%;  
(c) the additional rate is 45%.  
And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

5. INCOME TAX  
(STARTING RATE LIMIT FOR SAVINGS)  
Resolved.  
And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

6. TRANSFERABLE TAX ALLOWANCE  
Resolved.  
(1) Chapter 3A of Part 3 of the Income Tax Act 2007 (transferable tax allowance) is amended as follows.  
(2) Section 55B (tax reduction: entitlement) is amended in accordance with paragraphs (3) to (5).  
(3) In subsection (2) (conditions for entitlement to tax reduction)—  
(a) for paragraph (a) (individual is spouse or civil partner of maker of election in force under section 55C) substitute—  
“(a) the individual is the gaining party (see section 55C(l)(a)) in the case of an election under section 55C which is in force for the tax year,”; and  
(b) in paragraph (d), for “individual’s” substitute “relinquishing”.  
(4) After subsection (5) insert—  
“(5A) In this section “the relinquishing spouse or civil partner”, in relation to an election under section 55C, means the individual mentioned in section 55C(l)(a) by whom, or by whose personal representatives, the election is made.”  
(5) In subsection (6) (reduced personal allowance for transferor)—  
(a) after “under subsection (1)”, insert “by reference to an election under section 55C”, and  
(b) for “individual’s” substitute “relinquishing”.  
(6) Section 55C (elections to reduce personal allowance) is amended in accordance with paragraphs (7) and (8).  
(7) In subsection (1)(a) (individual may make election if married or in civil partnership)—  
(a) after “the same person” insert “(“the gaining party”), and  
(b) in sub-paragraph (ii), after “when the election is made” insert “or, where the election is made after the death of one or each of them, when they were last both living”.  
(8) After subsection (4) insert—  
“(5) The personal representatives of an individual may make any election for the purposes of section 55B that the individual (if living) might make in relation to—  
(a) the tax year in which the individual dies, or  
(b) an earlier tax year.”  
(9) Section 55D (procedure for elections under section 55C) is amended in accordance with paragraphs (10) and (11).  
(10) In subsection (3) (elections which are not automatically continued in force for subsequent years), after “is made after the end of the tax year to which it relates” insert “or is made after the death of either of the spouses or civil partners”.  
(11) In subsection (4) (election may be withdrawn only by individual who made it), after “by whom the election was made” insert “an election made by an individual’s personal representatives may not be withdrawn”.  
(12) The amendments made by this Resolution—  
(a) come into force on 29 November 2017,  
(b) have effect in relation to elections made on or after that day, and  
(c) so have effect even where a relevant death occurred before that day.  
And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

7. DEDUCTION FOR SEAFARERS’ EARNINGS FOR DUTIES PERFORMED OUTSIDE UK  
Resolved.  
That provision may be made in connection with the application of Chapter 6 of Part 5 of the Income Tax (Earnings and Pensions) Act 2003 in relation to employment in the Royal Fleet Auxiliary Service.
8. EXEMPTION FOR ARMED FORCES’ ACCOMMODATION ALLOWANCES

Resolved.
That provision may be made exempting, from income tax, amounts paid as accommodation allowances to, or in respect of, members of the armed forces of the Crown.

9. BENEFITS IN KIND: CARS

Resolved.
That provision (including provision having retrospective effect) may be made amending Chapter 6 of Part 3 of the Income Tax (Earnings and Pensions) Act 2003.

10. FOREIGN-SERVICE RELIEF FOR BENEFITS ON TERMINATION OF EMPLOYMENT

Resolved.
That provision may be made amending Chapter 3 of Part 6 of the Income Tax (Earnings and Pensions) Act 2003 in connection with the termination of a person’s employment, relief given by that Chapter by reference to service within the definition of “foreign service” given by section 413(2) of that Act.

11. EMPLOYMENT INCOME PROVIDED THROUGH THIRD PARTIES

Resolved.
That provision may be made in connection with—
(a) the application and operation of Chapter 2 of Part 7A of the Income Tax (Earnings and Pensions) Act 2003, and
(b) the operation of Part 11 of that Act in connection with Schedule 11 to the Finance (No. 2) Act 2017

12. DISGUISED REMUNERATION SCHEMES (EARNINGS CHARGED TO TAX)

Resolved.
That—
(1) In section 554A of the Income Tax (Earnings and Pensions) Act 2003 (employment income provided through third parties: application of Chapter 2 of Part 7A), after subsection (5) insert—
“(5A) Subsections (5B) and (5C) apply where—
(a) a payment to a person other than A, or to A as a trustee, is of earnings from A’s employment with B, and
(b) the earnings are, in whole or part, charged to tax under the employment income Parts otherwise than by virtue of this Part,
and for this purpose it does not matter whether all or some only or none of the tax is paid (but see sections 554Z5 and 554Z11B).
(5B) For the purposes of subsection (5C), an arrangement is a “redirected-earnings arrangement” if it (wholly or partly) covers or relates to redirected earnings; and for the purposes of this subsection and subsection (5C) “redirected earnings” means—
(a) the payment mentioned in subsection (5A)(a), or
(b) any sum or other property which (directly or indirectly)—
(i) represents, or
(ii) is derived from,
that payment.
(5C) The circumstances mentioned in subsection (5A)—
(a) do not prevent a redirected-earnings arrangement being within subsection (l)(b), and
(b) do not prevent rewards or recognition or loans being in connection with A’s employment with B for the purposes of subsection (l)(c) where there is use of redirected earnings for the provision of the whole, or part, of the rewards or recognition or loans.”
(2) The amendment made by paragraph (1)—
(a) come into force on 29 November 2017,
(b) has effect for the purposes of the operation of Part 7A of the Income Tax (Earnings and Pensions) Act 2003 in relation to relevant steps taken on or after 22 November 2017, and
(c) so has effect in the case of payments within the new subsection (5A)(a) whenever made (including ones made before 6 April 2011).
And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

13. TRADING INCOME PROVIDED THROUGH THIRD PARTIES

Resolved.
That provision may be made about information for the purposes of the operation of Schedule 12 to the Finance (No. 2) Act 2017.

14. PENSIONS

Resolved.
That provision (including provision having retrospective effect) may be made about the application of Part 4 of the Finance Act 2004 in relation to—
(a) pension schemes that are Master Trust schemes,
(b) pension schemes established under section 67 of the Pensions Act 2008,
(c) pension schemes that have a dormant sponsoring employer, and
(d) pension schemes treated as registered by virtue of paragraph 1(1) of Schedule 36 to the Finance Act 2004.

15. EIS, SEIS, SI AND VCT RELIEFS

Resolved.
That provision may be made about reliefs under Parts 5, 5A, 5B and 6 of the Income Tax Act 2007, including—
(a) provision having retrospective effect, and
(b) (notwithstanding anything to the contrary in the practice of the House relating to the matters that may be included in Finance Bills) provision taking effect in a future year.

16. PARTNERSHIPS

Resolved.
That the following provision relating to partnerships may be made—
(a) provision as to how tax legislation applies where a partner is a bare trustee;
(b) provision for determining the income tax liability of indirect partners;
(c) provision about income tax returns for partnerships.

17. RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT EXPENDITURE CREDITS

Resolved.
That provision may be made amending section 104M(3) of the Corporation Tax Act 2009.
18. INTANGIBLE FIXED ASSETS
Resolved.
That provision may be made amending Part 8 of the Corporation Tax Act 2009.

19. CORPORATION TAX TREATMENT OF OIL ACTIVITIES: TARIFF RECEIPTS ETC
Resolved.
That provision may be made about the meaning of “tariif receipt” for the purposes of Part 8 of the Corporation Tax Act 2010.

20. HYBRID AND OTHER MISMATCHES
Resolved.
That provision (including provision having retrospective effect) may be made relating to Part 10 of the Taxation (International and Other Provisions) Act 2010.

21. CORPORATE INTEREST RESTRICTION
Resolved.
That provision (including provision having retrospective effect) may be made amending Part 6A of the Taxation (International and Other Provisions) Act 2010.

22. CORPORATION TAX: EDUCATION AUTHORITY OF NORTHERN IRELAND
Resolved.
That provision (including provision having retrospective effect) may be made relieving the Education Authority of Northern Ireland of liability to corporation tax.

23. CHARGEABLE GAINS (INDEXATION ALLOWANCE)
Resolved.
That provision may be made restricting indexation allowance for gains chargeable to corporation tax.

24. CHARGEABLE GAINS (TRANSFER OF ASSETS TO NON-RESIDENT COMPANY)
Resolved.
That provision may be made amending section 140 of the Taxation of Chargeable Gains Act 1992.

25. CHARGEABLE GAINS (DEPRECIATORY TRANSACTIONS)
Resolved.
That provision may be made amending section 176 of the Taxation of Chargeable Gains Act 1992.

26. FIRST-YEAR TAX CREDITS
Resolved.
That (notwithstanding anything to the contrary in the practice of the House relating to the matters that may be included in Finance Bills) provision may be made about first-year tax credits paid in connection with relevant first-year expenditure under the Capital Allowances Act 2001.

27. DOUBLE TAXATION RELIEF
Resolved.
That the following provision relating to double taxation relief may be made—

(a) provision in relation to counteraction notices given under Part 2 of the Taxation (International and Other Provisions) Act 2010;
(b) provision restricting credit relief under that Part, or deductions for foreign tax paid, by reference to amounts attributable to an overseas permanent establishment of a company that are used to reduce a foreign tax;
(c) provision (including provision having retrospective effect) to secure that the double taxation arrangements to which effect may be given by Order in Council include arrangements modifying the effect of earlier such arrangements and arrangements conferring functions on public authorities within or outside the United Kingdom.

28. BANK LEVY

Question put.
That provision may be made amending Schedule 19 to the Finance Act 2011, including (notwithstanding anything to the contrary in the practice of the House relating to the matters that may be included in Finance Bills) provision taking effect in a future year.

The House divided: Ayes 316, Noes 293.

Division No. 49] [7.1 pm

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afrifje, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Breerton, Jack
Bridge, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brooksnare, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Dockerty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dornies, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyly-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elishiwie, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Johnston, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, Mr Andrew
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Little, Rhona
Lloyd, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mank, Alison
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sherry
Murray, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paiesty, Ian
Parish, Neil
Patey, Nick
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Philp, Chris
Pincher, Christopher
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Purkslove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shehbrooke, Alec
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Rhys
Soubry, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Sym, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Tohurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whatley, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, Sammy
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Andrew Stephenson and Stuart Andrew

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amessbury, Mike
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin

Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carson, Dan
Chapman, Douglas
Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Coaker, Vernon
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Resolved.

That provision may be made about the treatment of securities traded on a multilateral trading facility operated by an EEA-regulated recognised stock exchange.

30. SETTLEMENTS: ANTI-AVOIDANCE ETC

Resolved.

That provision may be made—

(a) amending Chapter 2 of Part 3 of the Taxation of Chargeable Gains Act 1992 in connection with capital payments received from a settlement,

Question accordingly agreed to.

Tellers for the Ayes: Vicky Foxcroft

Tellers for the Noes: Jessica Morden and

29. DEBT TRADED ON A MULTILATERAL TRADING FACILITY

Resolved.

That provision may be made about the treatment of securities traded on a multilateral trading facility operated by an EEA-regulated recognised stock exchange.
(b) amending Chapter 5 of Part 5 of the Income Tax (Trading and Other Income) Act 2005 in connection with—

(i) benefits received from a settlement that are referable to protected foreign-source income (see sections 628A and 628B of that Act), and

(ii) capital sums received from a settlement by the settlor, and

(c) amending Chapter 2 of Part 13 of the Income Tax Act 2007 in connection with—

(i) amounts referable to income that is protected income for the purposes of section 733A(l)(b)(i) of that Act, and

(ii) benefits referable to such amounts.

31. DEDUCTIONS IN RESPECT OF EXPENDITURE ON VEHICLES

Resolved.

That provision (including provision having retrospective effect) may be made about deductions in respect of expenditure on vehicles when calculating profits for the purposes of income tax.

32. CARRIED INTEREST

Resolved.

That provision (including provision having retrospective effect) may be made about the sums in relation to which sections 43 and 45 of the Finance (No. 2) Act 2015 apply.

33. VALUE ADDED TAX (OPERATORS OF ONLINE MARKETPLACES)

Resolved.

That provision may be made—

(a) about joint and several liability for value added tax of operators of online marketplaces;

(b) imposing requirements on operators of online marketplaces in relation to value added tax registration numbers.

34. VAT REFUNDS

Resolved.

That provision may be made about refunds of value added tax to—

(a) combined authorities established under section 103(1) of the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009,

(b) fire and rescue authorities, and

(c) police authorities,

in relation to supplies made, and acquisitions and importations taking place, on or after the day on which the Bill containing provision authorised by this Resolution is enacted.

35. STAMP DUTY LAND TAX (HIGHER RATES FOR ADDITIONAL DWELLINGS)

Resolved.

That—

(1) Schedule 4ZA to the Finance Act 2003 (stamp duty land tax: higher rates for additional dwellings and dwellings purchased by companies) is amended as follows.

Previous residence required to be disposed of entirely

(2) Paragraph 3 (single dwelling transactions: purchaser is an individual) is amended as follows.

(3) In sub-paragraph (6)—

(a) after paragraph (b) insert—

(b) immediately after the effective date of the previous transaction, neither the purchaser nor the purchaser’s spouse or civil partner had a major interest in the sold dwelling,” and

(b) in paragraph (c) for “that period of three years” substitute “the period of three years referred to in paragraph (b).”

(4) After sub-paragraph (6) insert—

“(6A) Sub-paragraph (6)(ba) does not apply in relation to a spouse or civil partner of the purchaser if the two of them were not living together (see paragraph 9(3)) on the effective date of the transaction concerned.”

(5) In sub-paragraph (7) after paragraph (b) (but before “and”) insert—

“(ba) immediately after the effective date of that other land transaction, neither the purchaser nor the purchaser’s spouse or civil partner has a major interest in the sold dwelling.”

(6) After sub-paragraph (7) insert—

“(8) Sub-paragraph (7)(ba) does not apply in relation to a spouse or civil partner of the purchaser if the two of them are not living together (see paragraph 9(3)) on the effective date of that other land transaction.”

Exception where purchaser has prior interest in purchased dwelling

(7) After paragraph 7 insert—

“Exception where purchaser has prior interest in purchased dwelling

(7A) (1) A chargeable transaction which would (but for this paragraph) fall within paragraph 3 or paragraph 6 does not fall within that paragraph if—

(a) the purchaser had a major interest (“the prior interest”) in the relevant purchased dwelling immediately before the effective date of the transaction, and

(b) the relevant purchased dwelling had been the purchaser’s only or main residence throughout the period of three years ending with the effective date of the transaction.

(2) Sub-paragraph (1) does not apply if—

(a) the prior interest is a term of years absolute or a leasehold estate, and

(b) immediately before the effective date of the transaction, the remaining term of the prior interest is less than 21 years.

(3) Sub-paragraph (1) does not apply if immediately before the effective date of the transaction—

(a) the purchaser is beneficially entitled as a joint tenant to the prior interest, and

(b) there are more than three other joint tenants.

(4) Sub-paragraph (1) does not apply if immediately before the effective date of the transaction the purchaser is beneficially entitled as a tenant in common or coparcener to less than a quarter of the prior interest.

(5) In this paragraph “relevant purchased dwelling” means—

(a) the purchased dwelling mentioned in paragraph 3(l)(b), or (as the case may be)

(b) the purchased dwelling which meets the conditions mentioned in paragraph 6(l)(c).”

Exception where spouses and civil partners purchasing from one another

(8) After paragraph 9 insert—

“Spouses and civil partners purchasing from one another

9A (1) A chargeable transaction is not a higher rates transaction for the purposes of paragraph 1 if—

(a) there is only one purchaser,

(b) there is only one vendor, and

(c) on the effective date of the transaction the two of them are—

(i) married to, or civil partners of, each other, and

(ii) living together (see paragraph 9(3)).”
(2) Where—
(a) there are two purchasers in relation to a chargeable transaction, and
(b) one of them (“P”) is also the vendor in relation to the transaction,
P is to be treated for the purposes of sub-paragraph (1) as not being a purchaser.

(3) Where—
(a) there are two vendors in relation to a chargeable transaction, and
(b) one of them (“V”) is also the purchaser in relation to the transaction,
V is to be treated for the purposes of sub-paragraph (1) as not being a vendor.

Property adjustment on divorce, dissolution of civil partnership etc

(9) After paragraph 9A (as inserted by paragraph (8) of this Resolution) insert—

“Property adjustment on divorce, dissolution of civil partnership etc

9B (1) This paragraph applies where—
(a) a person (“A”) has a major interest in a dwelling,
(b) a property adjustment order has been made in respect of the interest for the benefit of another person (“B”), and
(c) the dwelling—
(i) is B’s only or main residence, and
(ii) is not A’s only or main residence.

(2) A is to be treated for the purposes of this Schedule as not having the interest in the dwelling.

(3) “Property adjustment order” means—
(a) an order under section 24(1)(b) of the Matrimonial Causes Act 1973 (property adjustment orders in connection with matrimonial proceedings);
(b) an order under section 17(1)(a)(ii) of the Matrimonial and Family Proceedings Act 1984 (property adjustment orders after overseas divorce) corresponding to such an order as is mentioned in paragraph (a),
(c) an order under Article 26(1) (b) of the Matrimonial Causes (Northern Ireland) Order 1978 (property adjustment orders in connection with divorce proceedings etc),
(d) an order under Article 21(a)(ii) of the Matrimonial and Family Proceedings (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 (property adjustment orders after overseas divorce) corresponding to such an order as is mentioned in paragraph (c),
(e) an order under paragraph 7(l)(b) of Schedule 5 or paragraph 7(1)(b) of Schedule 15 to the Civil Partnership Act 2004 (property adjustment orders in connection with dissolution etc of civil partnership), or
(f) an order under paragraph 9 of Schedule 7 or paragraph 9 of Schedule 17 to the Civil Partnership Act 2004 (property adjustment orders in connection with overseas dissolution etc of civil partnership) corresponding to such an order as is mentioned in paragraph (e)."

Purchase etc by person appointed under Mental Capacity Act 2005 to make decisions for a child

(10) In paragraph 12 (settlements and bare trusts with beneficiaries who are children) after sub-paragraph (1) insert—

“(1A) But this paragraph does not apply if the trustee (or any of the trustees) of the settlement or bare trust concerned—
(a) was the purchaser in relation to the land transaction,
(b) holds the interest in the dwelling, or
(c) disposed of the interest in the dwelling, in the exercise of powers conferred on the trustee by reason of a relevant court appointment made in respect of the child concerned.

(1B) In sub-paragraph (1A) “relevant court appointment” means—
(a) an appointment under section 16 of the Mental Capacity Act 2005,
(b) an appointment under section 113 of the Mental Capacity Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, or
(c) an equivalent appointment under the law of a country or territory outside England, Wales and Northern Ireland.”

(11) In paragraph 17 (dwellings outside England, Wales and Northern Ireland) after sub-paragraph (5) insert—

“(5A) Sub-paragraph (4) does not apply if the interest in the dwelling was acquired in the child’s name or on the child’s behalf by a person acting in exercise of powers conferred on that person by reason of a relevant court appointment made in respect of the child.

(5B) In sub-paragraph (5A) “relevant court appointment” has the meaning given by paragraph 12(1B)”

Minor and consequential amendments

(12) In paragraph 2, after sub-paragraph (3) insert—

“(3A) Sub-paragraphs (2) and (3) are subject to paragraph 9A (spouses and civil partners purchasing from one another).”

(13) In paragraph 3—
(a) after sub-paragraph (1) insert—
(1A) But sub-paragraph (1) is subject to paragraph 7A.,
and
(b) in sub-paragraph (7), in the opening words, for “may become” substitute “is also”.

(14) In paragraph 6—
(a) after sub-paragraph (1) insert—
“(1A) But sub-paragraph (1) is subject to paragraph 7A.”,
and
(b) in sub-paragraph (3) for “and (7)” substitute “to (8)”.

(15) In paragraph 8—
(a) in sub-paragraph (1) for “ceases to be” substitute “is not”,
(b) in sub-paragraph (2) for “was” substitute “is”,
(c) in sub-paragraph (3) for “its ceasing to be a higher rates transaction” substitute “the application of paragraph 3(7)”, and
(d) in sub-paragraph (4) for “its ceasing to be a higher rates transaction” substitute “the application of paragraph 3(7)”.

(16) In paragraph 9(3) for “paragraph” substitute “Schedule”.

(17) In paragraph 12—
(a) in sub-paragraph (2)(a) after “any” insert “relevant”,
(b) for sub-paragraph (3) substitute—
“(3) For the purposes of sub-paragraph (2) a spouse or civil partner of P is “relevant” if the spouse or civil partner—
(a) is not a parent of the child, and
(b) is living together with P (see paragraph 9(3)),”, and
(c) omit sub-paragraph (4).

(18) In the italic heading before paragraph 17 omit “,”, Wales”.

(19) In paragraph 17, in sub-paragraph (1) omit “,”, Wales”.

(20) In paragraph 17, after sub-paragraph (1) insert—
“(1A) In the application of those provisions in relation to a dwelling situated in Wales—
(a) references to a “major interest” in the dwelling are to an interest in the dwelling of a kind mentioned in section 117(2),
(b) references to a “land transaction” in relation to the dwelling are to the acquisition of an interest in the dwelling, and
(c) references to the “effective date” of a land transaction in relation to the dwelling are to the date on which the interest in the dwelling is acquired.”

(21) In paragraph 17, in sub-paragraph (3)—
(a) in the words before paragraph (a) after “(1)” insert”, (1A),
(b) in paragraph (a)—
(i) after “(6)(b)” insert”, (ba), and
(ii) after “(7)(b)” insert”, (ba), and
(c) after paragraph (b) insert—
“(ba) paragraph 9B,”.

(22) In paragraph 17, in sub-paragraph (4)—
(a) omit”, Wales”, and
(b) after “any” insert “relevant”.

(23) In paragraph 17, for sub-paragraph (5) substitute—
“(5) For the purposes of sub-paragraph (4) a spouse or civil partner of P is “relevant” if the spouse or civil partner—
(a) is not a parent of the child, and
(b) is living together with P (see paragraph 9(3)).”

(24) In paragraph 17, omit sub-paragraph (6).

(25) In section 128(9)(b) of the Finance Act 2016 for “during that period of three years” substitute “the words from “during” to “paragraph (b)”."

Commencement

(26) The amendments made by this Resolution (other than those made by paragraphs (18), (19), (20), (21)(a) and (22)(a)) have effect in relation to any land transaction of which the effective date is, or is after, 22 November 2017.

(27) But the amendments made by paragraphs (2) to (6) do not have effect in relation to a transaction—
(a) effected in pursuance of a contract entered into and substantially performed before 22 November 2017, or
(b) effected in pursuance of a contract entered into before that date and not excluded by paragraph (28).

(28) A transaction effected in pursuance of a contract entered into before 22 November 2017 is excluded by this paragraph if—
(a) there is any variation of the contract, or assignment of rights under the contract, on or after 22 November 2017,
(b) the transaction is effected in consequence of the exercise on or after that date of any option, right of pre-emption or similar right, or
(c) on or after that date there is an assignment, sub-sale or other transaction relating to the whole or part of the subject-matter of the contract as a result of which a person other than the purchaser under the contract becomes entitled to call for a conveyance.

(29) The amendments made by paragraphs (18), (19), (20), (21)(a) and (22)(a) have effect in relation to any land transaction in relation to which the amendment made by section 16(2) of the Wales Act 2014 (disapplication of UK stamp duty land tax) has effect.

And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

36. STAMP DUTY LAND TAX (RELIEF FOR FIRST-TIME BUYERS)

Resolved,
That—
(1) Part 4 of the Finance Act 2003 (stamp duty land tax) is amended as follows.
(2) After section 57A insert—
“57B First-time buyers

(1) Schedule 6ZA provides relief for first-time buyers.
(2) Any relief under that Schedule must be claimed in a land transaction return or an amendment of such a return.”
(3) After Schedule 6 insert—
“SCHEDULE 6ZA
RELIEF FOR FIRST-TIME BUYERS
Part 1
ELIGIBILITY FOR RELIEF
Eligibility for relief
1 (1) Relief may be claimed for a chargeable transaction if the following conditions are met (but this is subject to sub-paragraph (7)).
(2) The first condition is that the main subject-matter of the transaction consists of a major interest in a single dwelling (“the purchased dwelling”).
(3) The second condition is that the relevant consideration for the transaction (other than any consisting of rent) is not more than £500,000.
(4) The third condition is that the purchaser, or (if more than one) each of the purchasers, is a first-time buyer who intends to occupy the purchased dwelling as the purchaser’s only or main residence.
(5) The fourth condition is that—
(a) the transaction is not linked to another land transaction, or
(b) the transaction is linked only to land transactions that are within sub-paragraph (6).
(6) A land transaction is within this sub-paragraph if the main subject-matter of the transaction consists of—
(a) an interest in land that is or forms part of the garden or grounds of the purchased dwelling, or
(b) an interest in or right over land that subsists for the benefit of—
(i) the purchased dwelling, or
(ii) land that is or forms part of the garden or grounds of the purchased dwelling.
(7) Relief may not be claimed under this paragraph for a chargeable transaction if it is a higher rates transaction for the purposes of paragraph 1 of Schedule 4ZA.

Eligibility for relief: linked transactions within paragraph 1 (6)
2 (1) Where a land transaction (“the main transaction”) is eligible for relief under paragraph 1 (or would be if it were a chargeable transaction), relief may also be claimed for any chargeable transaction that is linked to the main transaction.
(2) But relief may not be claimed under this paragraph for a chargeable transaction if the purchaser, or (if more than one) any of the purchasers in relation to the transaction is not a purchaser in relation to the main transaction.

Eligibility for relief: alternative finance arrangements
3 (1) This paragraph applies in relation to a land transaction which is the first transaction under an alternative finance arrangement entered into between a person and a financial institution.
(2) The person (rather than the institution) is to be treated as the purchaser in relation to the transaction for the purposes of paragraphs 1(4) and 2(2).
(3) In this paragraph—
“alternative finance arrangement” means an arrangement of a kind mentioned in section 71A(1) or 73(1),
“financial institution” has the meaning it has in those sections (see section 73BA), and
“first transaction”, in relation to an alternative finance arrangement, has the meaning given by section 71A(6)(a) or (as the case may be) section 73(1)(a)(i).
Part 2

THE RELIEF

The relief

1 If relief is claimed under paragraph 1 or 2 for a chargeable transaction, the amount of tax chargeable in respect of the transaction is to be determined as if in section 55(1B) (amount of tax chargeable: general) for Table A there were substituted—

‘Table A: Residential

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relevant consideration</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>So much as does not exceed £300,000</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any remainder (so far as not exceeding £300,000)</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Withdrawal of relief

5 (1) This paragraph applies if—

(a) relief is claimed under paragraph 1 or 2 for a chargeable transaction (“the first transaction”), and

(b) the effect of another land transaction (“the later transaction”) that is linked to the first transaction is that the first transaction ceases to be a transaction for which relief may be claimed under that paragraph.

(2) Tax or (as the case may be) additional tax is chargeable on the first transaction as if the claim had not been made.

Part 3

INTERPRETATION

‘First-time buyer’

6 (1) In this Schedule “first-time buyer” means an individual who—

(a) has not previously been a purchaser in relation to a land transaction the main subject-matter of which was a major interest in a dwelling,

(b) has not previously acquired an equivalent interest in a dwelling situated in a country or territory outside England, Wales and Northern Ireland,

(c) has not previously been, or been one of the persons who was, “the person” for the purposes of section 71A or 73 in a case where the main subject-matter of the first transaction within the meaning of the section concerned was a major interest in a dwelling, and

(d) would not have been such a person for those purposes in such a case if the provisions mentioned in paragraph (c) had been in force, and had had effect in the country or territory concerned at all material times (subject, where required, to appropriate modifications).

(2) For the purposes of sub-paragraph (1)(b) and (d), ignore a lease which has less than 21 years to run at the beginning of the day after the date on which it is acquired.

‘Relevant consideration’

7 In this Schedule “relevant consideration” means—

(a) in the case of a transaction that is not one of a number of linked transactions, the chargeable consideration for the transaction, and

(b) in the case of a transaction that is one of a number of linked transactions, the total of the chargeable consideration for all those transactions.

‘Major interest’

8 The main subject-matter of a transaction is not a major interest for the purposes of this Schedule if it is a term of years absolute which has less than 21 years to run at the beginning of the day after the effective date of the transaction.

What counts as a dwelling

9 (1) This paragraph sets out rules for determining what counts as a dwelling for the purposes of this Schedule.

(a) it is used or suitable for use as a single dwelling, or

(b) it is in the process of being constructed or adapted for such use.

(2) A building or part of a building counts as a dwelling if—

(3) Land that is, or is to be, occupied or enjoyed with a dwelling as a garden or grounds (including any building or structure on that land) is taken to be part of that dwelling.

(4) Land that subsists, or is to subsist, for the benefit of a dwelling is taken to be part of that dwelling.

(5) The main subject-matter of a transaction is also taken to consist of a major interest in a dwelling if—

(a) substantial performance of a contract constitutes the effective date of that transaction by virtue of a relevant deeming provision,

(b) the main subject-matter of the transaction consists of a major interest in a building, or a part of a building, that is to be constructed or adapted under the contract for use as a single dwelling, and

(c) construction or adaptation of the building, or part of a building, has not begun by the time the contract is substantially performed.

(6) In sub-paragraph (5)—

“contract” includes any agreement,

“relevant deeming provision” means any of sections 44 to 45A or paragraph 5(1) or (2) of Schedule 2A or paragraph 12 of Schedule 17A, and

“substantially performed” has the same meaning as in section 44.

(7) A building or part of a building used for a purpose specified in section 116(2) or (3) is not used as a dwelling for the purposes of subparagraphs (2) or (5).

(8) Where a building or part of a building is used for a purpose mentioned in sub-paragraph (7), no account is to be taken for the purposes of sub-paragraph (2) of its suitability for any other use.

(4) In section 110 (approval of regulations under general power) at the end insert—

“(7) This section does not apply to regulations containing only provision varying Schedule 6ZA or paragraph 16 of Schedule 9 which does not increase any person’s liability to tax.”

(5) In Schedule 9 (right to buy, shared ownership leases etc), at the end insert—

‘First-time buyers

16 (1) This paragraph applies where—

(a) a lease is granted as mentioned in sub-paragraph (1)(a) of paragraph 2 and the conditions in sub-paragraph (2) of that paragraph are met but no election is made for tax to be charged in accordance with that paragraph,

(b) a lease is granted as mentioned in sub-paragraph (1)(a) of paragraph 4 and the conditions in sub-paragraph (2) of that paragraph are met but no election is made for tax to be charged in accordance with that paragraph,

(c) paragraph 4A applies in relation to the acquisition of an interest (but the acquisition is not exempt from charge by virtue of sub-paragraph (2) of that paragraph),

(d) a shared ownership trust is declared but no election is made for tax to be charged in accordance with paragraph 9, or

(e) an equity-acquisition payment is made under a shared ownership trust (but the equity-acquisition payment, and the consequential increase in the purchaser’s beneficial interest, are not exempt from charge by virtue of paragraph 10).

(2) Schedule 6ZA (relief for first-time buyers) does not apply in relation to—

(a) the acquisition of the lease,

(b) the acquisition of the interest,

(c) the declaration of the shared ownership trust, or
(6) The following provisions (which are spent provisions relating to first-time buyers) are repealed—
   (a) section 57AA of the Finance Act 2003,
   (b) section 73CA of that Act,
   (c) section 110(6) of that Act,
   (d) paragraph 15 of Schedule 9 to that Act, and
   (e) section 6 of the Finance Act 2010.

(7) In Schedule 2 to the Wales Act 2014 (amendments relating to the disapplication of UK stamp duty land tax in relation to Wales), after paragraph 9 insert—

   “9A (1) Paragraph 6 of Schedule 6ZA (relief for first-time buyers: definition of “first-time buyer”) is amended as follows.

   (2) In sub-paragraph (1)(b)—
      (a) after “acquired” insert”—
         (i) “, and
      (b) at the end insert “or
              (ii) an interest of a kind mentioned in section 117(2)
                   in a dwelling situated in Wales,”.

(3) The amendment made by this Resolution comes into force at 6pm on 22 November 2017.

And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

37. LANDFILL TAX

Resolved,

That provision may be made about landfill tax on disposals made in England and Northern Ireland.

38. AIR PASSENGER DUTY (RATES)

Resolved,

That (notwithstanding anything to the contrary in the practice of the House relating to the matters that may be included in Finance Bills) provision taking effect in a future year may be made—

(a) increasing the rate of duty specified in section 30(4A)(b) of the Finance Act 1994, and
(b) increasing the multipliers specified in sections 30(4E)(d) and 30A(5A)(c)(ii) of that Act.

39. VEHICLE EXCISE DUTY

Resolved,

That provision may be made about the rates of vehicle excise duty.

40. TOBACCO PRODUCTS DUTY: RATES

Resolved,

That—

(1) The tobacco Products Duty Act 1979 is amended as follows.
(2) For the table in Schedule 1 substitute—

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tobacco Product</th>
<th>Duty Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Cigarettes      | An amount equal to the higher of—
|                 | (a) 16.5% of the retail price plus £217.23 per thousand cigarettes, or |
|                 | (b) £280.15 per thousand cigarettes. |
| Cigars          | £270.96 per kilogram |
| Hand-rolling tobacco | £221.18 per kilogram |
| Other smoking tobacco and chewing tobacco | £119.13 per kilogram |

(3) Sub-paragraphs (3) and (4) of paragraph 1A of this Schedule (meaning of “the applicable CO₂ emissions figure”) apply for the purposes of this Part of this
Schedule as they apply for the purposes of Part 1A of this Schedule, but—

(a) any reference to an EU certificate of conformity in paragraph 1A(3) or (4) is to be construed in accordance with sub-paragraph (4) of this paragraph, and

(b) for the purpose of determining the applicable CO₂ emissions figure, ignore any WLTP (worldwide harmonised light-duty vehicles test procedures) values specified in an EU certificate of conformity.”;

(d) in paragraph 1H(2) (meaning of ‘light goods vehicle’), at the end insert “or, as the case may be, within Category N1 of Annex II to Directive 2007/46/EC (vehicle designed and constructed primarily for the carriage of goods and having a maximum mass not exceeding 3.5 tonnes)”.

(2) In Schedule 2 to the Vehicle Excise and Registration Act 1994 (exempt vehicles), in paragraph 25(4)(b), for “Schedule)” substitute “Schedule as read with paragraph 1GA(5) of that Schedule)”.

(3) The amendments made by this Resolution have effect in relation to licences taken out on or after 29 November 2017.

And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

44. INCIDENTAL PROVISION ETC

Resolved,

That it is expedient to authorise—

(a) any incidental or consequential charges to any duty or tax (including charges having retrospective effect) that may arise from provisions designed in general to afford relief from taxation, and

(b) any incidental or consequential provision (including provision having retrospective effect) relating to provision authorised by any other resolution.

Ordered,

That a Bill be brought in upon the foregoing Resolutions;

That the Chairman of Ways and Means, the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Boris Johnson, Secretary Greg Clark, Secretary Sajid Javid, Elizabeth Truss, Mel Stride, Andrew Jones and Stephen Barclay bring in the Bill.

FINANCE (NO. 2) BILL

Presentation and First Reading

Mel Stride accordingly presented a Bill to grant certain duties, to alter other duties, and to amend the law relating to the national debt and the public revenue, and to make further provision in connection with finance.

Bill read the First time: to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 134).

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr Speaker: With the leave of the House, I propose taking motions 3 to 9 together.

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

DEFENCE

That the draft International Headquarters and Defence Organisations (Designation and Privileges) Order 2017, which was laid before this House on 21 June, be approved.

ELECTRICITY

That the draft Renewables Obligation (Amendment) (Energy Intensive Industries) Order 2017, which was laid before this House on 19 July, be approved.

BANKS AND BANKING

That the draft Banking Act 2009 (Service Providers to Payment Systems) Order 2017, which was laid before this House on 19 July, be approved.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

That the draft Greater Manchester Combined Authority (Public Health Functions) Order 2017, which was laid before this House on 20 July, be approved.

CHARITIES

That the draft Charitable Incorporated Organisations (Consequential Amendments) Order 2017, which was laid before this House on 7 September, be approved.

TELECOMMUNICATIONS

That the draft Drug Dealing Telecommunications Restriction Orders Regulations 2017, which were laid before this House on 12 October, be approved.

ENTERPRISE

That the draft Small Business Commissioner (Scope and Scheme) Regulations 2017, which were laid before this House on 19 July, be approved.—(Mike Freer.)

Question agreed to.

PETITIONS

Stop HS2 Phase Two in Trowell

7.20 pm

Mr Speaker: I find it surprising, not to say shocking, that there should be a sudden exodus of right hon. and hon. Members from the Chamber at the point at which the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) is due to present her petition, in which I had hoped there would be a keen interest in all parts of the House. If Members unaccountably insist on departing the Chamber, I trust that they will do so quickly, quietly and without fuss, so that the rest of us, keenly interested in said petition, can listen to its eloquent presentation by the right hon. Lady.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker; that is very kind of you. I rise to present two petitions relating to High Speed 2. The first has more than 1,200 signatures from residents of the village of Trowell, and it declares that they “are opposed to the HS2 project in its entirety.”

They believe that HS2 “will provide no benefits to Trowell”, and that the money would be better spent on “existing railway routes and other transport networks.”

The second petition has been signed by 125 Trowell residents. They are opposed to a 60-foot viaduct through the village that would cause disruption during its construction and adversely impact the village.
Following is the full text of the petitions:

[The petition of residents of Trowell,]

Declares that they are opposed to the HS2 project in its entirety. They believe that HS2 Phase Two will provide no benefits to Trowell and the financial cost of the project would be better spent elsewhere, including improving existing railway routes and other transport networks.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons ask HS2 Ltd. to stop plans to build HS2 Phase Two and look at more reasonable alternatives.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[The petition of residents of Trowell,]

Declares that they are opposed to the proposed viaduct through Trowell which is part of the HS2 Phase 2 project and will be 60 feet high in some places to cross over the M1 motorway, the A609 and an existing railway viaduct. The proposals will cause significant disruption to Trowell’s residents during construction and the resulting viaduct would dominate over homes in the village, as well as being taller than the church spire.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges HS2 Ltd. to dispense with proposals to build a viaduct in Trowell and come up with alternative solutions that will have less impact on residents.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

Lower Thames Crossing

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Mike Freer.)

7.22 pm

Adam Holloway (Gravesend) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for selecting this matter for debate. I am very sorry that the Chamber has just cleared, because if Members had stayed, they would have heard how a historic opportunity to fix the M25 at Dartford—as we know, it is broken there—has been missed, therefore condemning our constituents to another two or three decades of gridlock at Dartford.

I guess that the Minister knows my views on this subject, so I will try to keep this short and sweet. Later, I will discuss our concerns about the new crossing, but before that, I think that I need again to go through the uncomfortable truths about what is behind this.

It is a fact that any crossing to the east of the existing crossing will do nothing to ease the long-standing congestion and pollution at Dartford. For many years, all of us have spent hours sitting in traffic there. The people of Dartford have experienced years of gridlock, pollution, lung disease and everything else. The crossing has been stretched beyond capacity for years, leading to an absolute nightmare for the people of Dartford. In my view, they have been let down by their elected representatives, who should have been begging for the crossing to be fixed.

What is the cause of the situation at Dartford? All of us have been on this road, most of us sat in traffic. Only at Dartford do a little local road, regional roads and the busiest motorway in Europe—the M25, which goes around London—collide. We have three types of traffic—local, regional and long-range national—and the gridlock is caused not by the crossing itself, but by the fact that one of the tunnels is unsuitable for vehicles such as fuel tankers. If a fuel tanker tries to go into the tunnel without an escort, all the traffic has to be stopped, so it builds up. Going from north to south, the M25 is just as good or bad as the rest of it, but that is the cause.

For the last 12 years or so, I have thought that because the M25 will always run through Dartford, the only answer to fixing the broken traffic at Dartford is to fix the M25 at Dartford, not seven miles down the road. I thought that the only solution would be a new bridge or, better, a very long seven-mile tunnel from north of the A13 to south of the A2. The fact that that is not going to happen is inexplicable, and all the more so because Highways England estimates that the new crossing will remove only 14% of the traffic from Dartford.

What needs to happen now? The new crossing to the east of Gravesend is being built, but, as I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) will agree, mitigation is urgently needed around the tunnel approaches. About 50 million journeys are made through the tunnel annually, and it is closed briefly more than 300 times a year. When that happens, it results in the gridlock that we have all experienced.

This decision has condemned millions to spending decades more in traffic jams. A project that was initially designed to fix the problem at Dartford has bizarrely morphed into an economic development project that will undoubtedly benefit the people of Kent and Essex, but will condemn the people of Dartford to decades of
further ill health, pollution and gridlock. The constituents of everyone in this House, including hon. Members from north of the border, will, from time to time, spend huge amounts of time in that traffic. I once spent an hour and a half in it, but I have been visited by people who have been in it for two hours. A couple of years ago, there was a complete blockage and people waited there for 12 hours. Closer to home, thousands of my constituents’ homes will effectively be blighted over the years that it takes to build the crossing.

The decision comes at a time when we are thinking about the future. Autonomous vehicles are no longer the realm of science fiction, and some car manufacturers say that they will have autonomous cars on the road within the next decade. There will be an awful lot of growth in the movement of goods by autonomous vehicles. What does that mean? The big thing about autonomous vehicles is that they can travel much closer together and optimise the road system. If there is gridlock, all the other cars can be switched off and a road train can clear a whole area of traffic very quickly before another road train is released across it. That technology will, if anything, make our roads considerably easier to use.

It is possible to argue the other way. Autonomous vehicles will allow us to get in our car and trundle up to Scotland or travel to work without the stress of driving, allowing us to go to sleep, read a book or whatever. I accept that there is an argument that such vehicles may make more journeys likely, but I do not think that that is the case, given the internet and moves towards home working. I believe that autonomous vehicles will greatly optimise our existing road infrastructure.

If we look at the skyline of Dartford from the traffic jam, we see houses that have chimneys and plenty that do not. The reason why those houses do not have chimneys is that we no longer all heat our homes by burning coal or wood. As with many other areas of public spending, we must therefore look at the effects that a new disruptive technology will have on massive infrastructure projects such as this one, which will cost at least £6 billion. In mitigation of the terrible traffic, it really would not be rocket science to look at tunnel freight trains. Why do all the trucks have to unload at Folkestone? If they went on up north, it would generate enormous good will, which, frankly, is in short supply. I also hope that as much as possible of the spoil from the great big boring machine can be dumped so that people do not have to look at this eyesore.

Even if we accept that Highways England will ignore the irrational aspects of building a crossing east of Gravesend, which will not help Dartford, there are many problems with its latest plans for the lower Thames crossing that I and my constituents want addressed. The main purpose of this debate—I will end quite soon—is to outline my concerns and those of the Lower Thames Crossing Association. I and Mr Bob Lane from the association had an excellent meeting today with Tim Jones, the project director from Highways England, and we are very grateful to him for the intelligent and constructive way in which he is approaching this project. I hope that the Minister has a map of the crossing in front of him, but if not, I can provide one. [Interruption.] He does; excellent.

I will return to the crossing, but before I do so, let me quickly outline the concerns of my hon. Friend the Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe). He apologises for not being in the Chamber—it is my fault, because I did not inform him about this debate until yesterday—but he has four points, which I will read verbatim for the benefit of the Minister. The first is:

“Will not fix problem at existing crossing. Remain convinced that the current plans will do little or nothing to alleviate actual problem at existing crossing.”

Secondly, he wants more “Cut and cover” and says that “wherever possible the route should be ‘cut in’ and below existing road, not above ground on stilts.”

Thirdly, he wants:

“Minimise footprint of”—

“junctions wherever possible and put in place full mitigation.”

Finally, on “Air Quality”, he says:

“Demonstrate BEFORE construction how new LTC WILL improve already poor air quality experienced in Thurrock.”

I have three main requests. First, I want Highways England to remove the proposed junction on to the A226. On a positive note, I see that it has now removed that junction, which is extremely important for us if we are to avoid people using the rat runs through Gravesend and local villages when the Dartford crossing is gridlocked, as it will continue to be because building this crossing will not solve the problem at Dartford.

Secondly, given that there will not now be an exit at the A226—I apologise to people who do not have a map—I want Highways England to move the southern portal to the south of the A226. This would make a great difference to people living in the village of Chalk. It would also get my friend the rector of Chalk, Rev. Nigel Bourne, off my back, as the current proposals separates the village from his beautiful medieval church, so doing this would be a personal help to me.

Thirdly, I want to maximise the use of what Highways England calls green corridors. As much as possible should be done to reduce noise, pollution and environmental impact where the road will cross Thong Lane for the community at Thong and the community up at Riverview Park. This development will be 100 metres from those residents, and doing that, which we should consider in relation to the massive overall cost of the scheme, would generate enormous good will, which, frankly, is in short supply. I also hope that as much as possible of the spoil from the great big boring machine can be dumped so that people do not have to look at this eyesore.

What started as a roads project has, in my view, bizarrely morphed into an economic one. Of course it will bring wider economic benefits to Kent and Essex, but we are again at risk of having another big disconnect between the people who make decisions and those who suffer from them. I am not just concerned about several thousands of my local residents who will be very badly affected over the next 10 years or so while the crossing is being built, and some of them once it has been built, although they are obviously my main concern. This is a disaster for the people of Dartford, for every one of us in this Chamber and for every one of our constituents, because the traffic jams will go on and on, and we will be paying over £6 billion for that.

Even staff at Highways England admits that however many new crossings are put to the east of the existing
crossing, at some stage they will have to come back to Dartford to fix the problem there. There is no getting away from the simple fact that the M25 runs through Dartford. We will fix the problem at Dartford by separating the long-range national traffic from the local and regional traffic. To be frank, I fear that in 20 years’ time, when people wake up to this missed historic opportunity to fix Dartford, some of us will be seen as the guilty men and women.

7.35 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate on the lower Thames crossing. He raised his constituents’ concerns diligently, and I would expect no less from such an assiduous constituency MP. Before I respond to the detailed points he raised, I reassure all those who are impacted by congestion at Dartford that tackling congestion on the strategic road network has to be a priority for the Government and Highways England.

I beg my hon. Friend’s forgiveness for reflecting briefly on how we got to where we are. The idea of a tunnel crossing at Dartford was first proposed in the 1920s. Initially, a crossing between Tilbury and Gravesend was suggested to replace the ferry service, but that was rejected in favour of a route further upstream, nearer Dartford. Of course, the Tilbury to Gravesend ferry is still in operation today, providing a half-hourly service.

Meanwhile, the Dartford crossing has provided the only road crossing of the Thames east of London for over 50 years. It is now one of the busiest roads in the country, used 50 million times a year by commuters, business travellers, haulage companies, emergency services and holidaymakers alike, connecting communities and businesses; providing a vital link between the channel ports, London and the rest of the UK; enabling local businesses to operate effectively; and providing access for local residents to housing, jobs, leisure and retail facilities on both sides of the river. In summary, it is a critical part of our strategic road network.

The crossing opened in stages as traffic demand grew. The west tunnel opened in 1963, the east tunnel in 1980 and the bridge in 1991. The existing crossing, as my hon. Friend pointed out, is at capacity for much of the time and is one of the least reliable sections of our strategic road network of motorways and major trunk roads. As he well knows, congestion on and the closure of the existing crossing occur frequently. That creates significant disruption and pollution, which impacts on communities and visitors locally, regionally and, indeed, up and down the UK.

The Government recognise that a lower Thames crossing is needed to reduce congestion at the existing Dartford crossing and to support economic growth across the region. The objectives of the scheme include affordability for both the Government and users, value for money; improved resilience of the Thames crossings and the major road network, and minimising adverse impacts on health and the environment by improving safety.

In 2009, the Department examined five locations where an additional crossing could be built. The most easterly of those were found to be too far from the existing crossing to ease the problems at Dartford and were eliminated from further consideration. In 2012, the Department began to appraise the remaining three locations, leading to a public consultation the following year. Location A was at the existing crossing, location B would have connected the A2 and the Swanscombe peninsula with the A1089, and location C was to the east of Gravesend. Later that year, the Government announced a decision not to proceed with location B because of the impact on local development plans and the limited transport benefits.

The Government published their response to the consultation in July 2014, confirming the need for an additional crossing between Essex and Kent. It commissioned Highways England to carry out a more detailed assessment of the remaining two locations, A and C.

More than 47,000 people took part in the consultation, making it the largest-ever public consultation for a UK road project. Highways England analysed the consultation findings and reported back to the Department for Transport, and in April 2017 we announced that our preferred route for the crossing was at location C. The route comprises a bored tunnel under the Thames, a new road north of the river, joining the M25 between junctions 29 and 30, and a new road south of the river, joining the A2 east of Gravesend. The preferred route announcement allows for detailed design and a proposal for three lanes as it continues its design work. All the changes include a new design for the junction with the M25 to help it blend better with the local landscape; a new junction and link road at Tilbury to reduce the impact of HGVs on local roads; the removal of the proposed A226 junction at Gravesend Road to reduce the impact on local villages, as my hon. Friend mentioned; a new design for the junction with the A2 and a widening of the A2 through to junction 1 of the M2 to help improve traffic flow; and a proposal for three lanes in each direction between the A2 and A13, rather than just two, as this could provide greater benefits.

Having responded to the feedback received during the preferred route consultation, Highways England is now undertaking further work to understand the extent to which it might be appropriate to increase the tunnelled section of the route to reduce noise and other environmental impacts. Furthermore, in relation to some of the concerns my hon. Friend has just raised, Highways England is now putting forward some important changes to the project design in response to the feedback it received in the consultation.

The changes include a new design for the junction with the M25 to help it blend better with the local landscape; a new junction and link road at Tilbury to reduce the impact of HGVs on local roads; the removal of the proposed A226 junction at Gravesend Road to reduce the impact on local villages, as my hon. Friend mentioned; a new design for the junction with the A2 and a widening of the A2 through to junction 1 of the M2 to help improve traffic flow; and a proposal for three lanes in each direction between the A2 and A13, rather than just two, as this could provide greater benefits.

In addition, Highways England will be assessing carefully the air quality and other environmental impacts of three lanes as it continues its design work. All the updates to the route design will be consulted on in 2018. This will allow all interested parties, including my hon. Friend, a further opportunity to give feedback on the latest version of the route.

An option to create a new crossing at Dartford was thoroughly assessed but rejected as it would not provide sufficient additional free-flowing capacity to the network. A new route at the existing crossing would not improve traffic resilience and would still cause severe congestion. The route would take at least six years to build and cause severe disruption affecting hundreds of millions of journeys while under construction. It would also worsen air quality and noise pollution in the immediate Dartford area.
The lower Thames crossing should not be seen as an isolated proposal. We have listened to concerns about the existing Dartford crossing.

Adam Holloway: I appreciate the constructive way in which my hon. Friend and the other Ministers have approached this since the decision was made, and, as I said, Highways England is being very decent, but I must return to my earlier point. How is a road that will reduce congestion at Dartford by only 14% still about traffic mitigation? It is not about sorting out Dartford; it has morphed into an issue of economic development, and we are kidding the public if we suggest otherwise.

Paul Maynard: I recognise the point my hon. Friend is trying to make. I have tried to make it clear that I am focusing on the traffic management aspects of the project, rather than the issue of wider economic benefits to which he refers.

I want to explain some of what we are seeking to do to improve matters at the Dartford crossing. Like many people, I recognise the concerns about the crossing. Anyone who has to drive through it will always bear in mind the possibility of severe delays. Highways England keeps the safety and performance of the crossing constantly under review to identify areas that can improve the crossing for all road users. The traffic safety system, introduced as part of the Dart charge, continues to be improved, together with the management of dangerous goods and abnormal loads.

Actions are being taken to improve the management of traffic during incidents and ensure the reopening of lanes as soon as possible afterwards. The road signing on the northbound Dartford crossing approaches is being reviewed, as is the movement of different types of vehicle as they approach the crossing, to see what improvements can be made.

Work continues with local authorities on both sides of the crossing to improve traffic flows between the local and strategic road networks, and I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) is closely involved in those very discussions. That includes joint working by Highways England and Kent County Council on a number of improvement measures for the junctions used by traffic approaching the crossing directly from Dartford. Highways England will continue to monitor the conditions at the crossing to understand how various factors are contributing to its underlying performance. It will also evaluate the impact of the measures implemented, and the public will be kept informed of the findings.

Last but not least, as was announced alongside the preferred route for the lower Thames crossing, we are committed to delivering a £10 million package of measures over the next four years to improve traffic flow at and around the existing Dartford crossing. The roads Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), meets the chief executive of Highways England monthly, and I can assure my hon. Friend that the performance of the existing crossing is kept under regular review.

I heard very clearly my hon. Friend’s suggestions about connected and autonomous vehicles, and I assure him that they are a frequent topic of debate in the Department. We want to ensure that all road projects take account of the future use of technology, and of how that might change road use in particular.

We recognise that there is more to be done at the existing Dartford crossing, and I am sure that Highways England will keep my hon. Friend and neighbouring Members updated on its plans and future actions. I was pleased to hear that representatives of Highways England were able to meet my hon. Friend today, so that they could go through the plans in more detail, and I hope that that engagement will continue and deepen.

I trust that I have reassured my hon. Friend about some key facts. The Government understand the critical role played by the Dartford crossing and the M25 in our strategic road network, but we also understand its local significance for residents on both sides of the estuary, including those in my hon. Friend’s constituency. We take congestion at the Dartford crossing, and in the wider Dartford area, very seriously, which is why we are taking action to improve matters in both the wider strategy network and the Dartford area.

Adam Holloway: Will the Minister give way again?

Paul Maynard: I will, since I have the time.

Adam Holloway: I greatly appreciate it.

Honestly, I love my constituents, but if I thought it was right to put the crossing there, I would man up, look them in the eye and say, “I am really sorry, but this is the correct decision.” Under any Government, including a Labour Government, I would say, “This is the right thing to do.” However, it is not about that. It is blindingly obvious to anyone that if we do not fix the M25 at Dartford, we will not fix the problem. What is the Department’s response to the fact that its own figures say that this new crossing will reduce congestion by only 14% at today’s rates, let alone by the time the thing is built? There is a desperate need for a new crossing at Dartford, and the Government will have to come back to it at some point.

Paul Maynard: I recognise the principal point that my hon. Friend is trying to make. The message that I am trying to communicate in return is that there are more ways than one of tackling the problem. I believe that substantial improvements can be made at the Dartford crossing in terms of ensuring its reliability and its stability, to ensure that when incidents do occur the road can be cleared as quickly as possible. I also think, however, that there is a wider strategic justification for the lower Thames crossing, which is why the Government made their announcement back in April.

We have to plan not just for the short term, but for the medium and the long term as well. We must develop the proposals for the lower Thames crossing as part of one of the biggest programmes of investment in the strategic road network in a generation. It supports motorists by investing in our motorways and our major A roads, which will boost economic growth, locally, regionally and nationally. That is why I think that we have made the right decision for the people of Kent, and for the people of Britain as a whole.

Question put and agreed to.

7.49 pm

House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Yemen

1. Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): What humanitarian support her Department is providing to Yemen.

2. Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): What humanitarian support her Department is providing to Yemen.

The Secretary of State for International Development

Penny Mordaunt: Yemen is the world's largest humanitarian crisis, with 21 million people in need of aid. The crisis will lead to famine unless all sides allow immediate commercial and humanitarian access throughout the country. The UK is playing a leading role in the current humanitarian and diplomatic response.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. I also welcome them to their position and wish them all the very best.

At the Select Committee on Defence two weeks ago, General Sir Richard Barrons stated that “intelligent, thoughtful officials like the National Security Adviser are looking at the £62 billion we spend on aid, diplomacy and defence and wondering if they can get a mix out of that.”

Is the Secretary of State satisfied that the balance is being struck between the United Kingdom’s tax receipts for sales to Saudi Arabia for it to flatten Yemen and the money that we are spending on development aid to rebuild Yemen?

Penny Mordaunt: We have been very clear that although we understand the coalition’s security concerns, they are not incompatible with allowing food and other supplies into the country. A huge diplomatic effort is being made, led by the Prime Minister, and she is using her visit this week to press further still. There has been movement in getting some aid and commercial supplies through, but that will not be enough. We need to keep pressing, and that is what this Government will do.

Alison Thewliss: The Foreign Secretary met a range of international partners yesterday. Unfortunately, the communiqué from that meeting seemed to talk a lot more about weapons than about getting aid and commercial goods into Yemen. Will the Secretary of State tell me a bit more about what the UK Government are doing to get aid and commercial goods into the country? Aid agencies know that the country needs not just aid but commercial goods. Each day, 130 children are dying in Yemen. We cannot wait any longer.

Penny Mordaunt: The communiqué did speak about what we are doing. In addition to the diplomatic efforts, a large part of my time since I have been in post has been spent looking at the other possible options in order logistically to get what is needed to the people who need it. There are immense problems, but we are looking at plan B—what else we can do. The key thing, and the only way to get the full supplies in, is to open up those two ports, and that is what we are pressing for.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend to her place and am delighted to see her there. Given the vital need to get humanitarian aid into Yemen, will she confirm what work the UK Government are doing via the United Nations to secure this access, particularly given our role in the Security Council?

Penny Mordaunt: I have been in close contact with both the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, and the Secretary-General himself. We are all working together to impress upon the coalition the importance of getting in not just aid but, critically, commercial supplies. That has been the main thrust of our argument. Clearly, a political settlement is needed in the long term, and we are pushing for all partners to engage.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): The situation for Yemen’s remaining Jews is harrowing, particularly for those outside the capital. What work is her Department doing to support the work of other Government Departments in helping to provide safe passage to other countries for these individuals?

Penny Mordaunt: We are extremely conscious of this matter. My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East has been doing an enormous amount of work, looking at particular communities. There are enormous numbers of people—21 million—who are in an absolutely dire situation. As well as trying to get the immediate issues resolved, we must keep pressing for a political process and for all parties to engage with efforts of the UN’s Special Envoy.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): It does not look as though the Prime Minister is being any more successful on this issue than she is on so many others. It really is a disgrace that although the Secretary of State’s Department is working on the humanitarian aspects by providing food and other aid to Yemen, we continue to sell arms to Saudi Arabia, which fuels the conflict. Where is the sense in that?

Penny Mordaunt: I understand the right hon. Lady’s concerns, but as I have said, while we do accept there are legitimate security concerns, that is entirely separate from, and should not be conflated with, preventing aid and commercial supplies from getting to a population. We are extremely concerned about the situation; we are extremely concerned that the coalition may be in breach of international humanitarian law, and I would refer her to the statement my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East gave on 7 November.
Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): I, too, welcome the Secretary of State to her new role. I heard what she just said, but on Sunday it emerged that the UK had been providing military assistance to Saudi Arabia to carry out military training as part of Operation Crossways. With the Foreign Secretary hosting Foreign Ministers from the region yesterday for talks, does the Secretary of State think that the UK’s military support and arms sales to Saudi Arabia are helping or hindering a political solution to the simply appalling and worsening humanitarian situation in Yemen?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady and other Members who have welcomed me to my post.

Although the UK military has provided training on targeting, to try to reduce civilian casualties, that has been entirely separate from the Saudi coalition’s actual campaign. We are trying to utilise the military-to-military contacts that we do have, which are deep, as part of our diplomatic process to try and get the coalition to realise that it must let aid into the two ports. We are also providing £1.3 million to help the UN’s verification and inspection mechanisms. If we can supply any practical support to give the coalition confidence that weapons are not coming in with aid, we will do that.

Polio

2. Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): What assessment has made of the effectiveness of international efforts to eradicate polio.

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Alistair Burt): Since 1988, the Global Polio Eradication Initiative has been highly effective in leading international efforts that have reduced polio cases by more than 99%. Only 15 cases have been reported in 2017—in two countries, Afghanistan and Pakistan—and we hope the last case will come through at the end of this year or early next year.

Luke Hall: I thank the Minister for that answer. May I also take the opportunity to welcome the leadership the Government have shown in the battle to eradicate polio from the face of this earth? Does my right hon. Friend agree that that is exactly the sort of thing the great British public can get behind, support and welcome our aid being used for?

Alistair Burt: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and he is absolutely right. Eradicating polio will be one of the great global public health success stories. United Kingdom taxpayer support since 1988 has helped prevent 1.5 million childhood deaths, and 16 million people are walking today who would otherwise be paralysed. People across the UK can be proud—not least those who support the Rotary movement, because the Rotary movement worldwide has played an important part, and I thank my colleagues in the Sandy Rotary club for their efforts in this regard.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that what has marked out the fight against polio is its international nature, and that we should be pressing this same approach to tackling other diseases at the Commonwealth summit next year?

Alistair Burt: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The use of United Kingdom funds to support things such as the Global Fund, which take part in international activity, and to strengthen global health systems is important. We have to work in partnership with others. The Commonwealth summit will provide a good opportunity to emphasise more of what we can do together.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend and the Department on the work that is being done to help eradicate polio. However, there is a risk that it can return if inoculations do not take place. Will he use the opportunity of the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting next year to press the case for further inoculations across the Commonwealth?

Alistair Burt: We are working with those who are putting together the Commonwealth summit to make sure there is an ambitious agenda devoted to all aspects of life in the Commonwealth, including global health. My hon. Friend is right on immunisation: through the GPEI, the UK will immunise 45 million children against polio and save more than 65,000 children from paralysis each year, so there will be no let-up in immunisation and the fight to make sure polio is eradicated.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Will the Minister show the same level of commitment he has shown on the international level to the prevention and eradication of animal and livestock diseases—something that poses a grave threat to very rural constituencies such as mine?

Mr Speaker: Order. That is scarcely even tangentially related to the matter on the paper. What the hon. Gentleman is implicitly saying is, “I don’t really like this question, and therefore I’d like to propose the insertion of another in its stead.” It is ingenious to the point of being cheeky. A one-sentence reply of no more than 20 words from the Minister.

Alistair Burt: I will draw the attention of one of my hon. Friends in the Government to the hon. Gentleman’s question.

Mr Speaker: Splendid.

Value for Money

4. Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): What steps she is taking to promote value for money in aid spending.

5. Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): What steps she is taking to promote value for money in aid spending.

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Rory Stewart): We work continuously to improve the way we design, implement and monitor programmes. Spending money well, wisely and efficiently makes sense both because it is British taxpayers’ money, and because it allows us to deliver better education, better healthcare and better nutrition for some of the world’s poorest people.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The use of United Kingdom funds to support things such as the Global Fund, which take part in international activity, and to strengthen global health systems is important. We have to work in partnership with others. The Commonwealth summit will provide a good opportunity to emphasise more of what we can do together.

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Lucy Allan: Greater transparency in how and where aid money is spent is vital to ensure public confidence. Will my hon. Friend champion the transparency agenda and ensure that aid to the Palestinian Authority does not fund radicalisation?

Rory Stewart: My hon. Friend’s question on the Palestinian Authority is for my right hon. Friend. The Minister for the Middle East, but the basic principle is clear. This is not just about transparency. Transparency is not an end in itself, but a means to achieving accountability. It is not just about getting the data out there; it is about making sure that people in the developing world can access the data, understand the data and use the data. We can improve only if we are challenged.

Alex Burghart: I welcome the Minister’s comments on accountability. My constituents raise value for money in aid spending with me on a regular basis. Does he agree that accountability to people in poor countries is essential in getting value for money?

Rory Stewart: Absolutely, and the challenge of accountability in the developing world is great. Here in Britain, where there is a free media and a lot of civil society, it is very easy, as we all know, for people to challenge a rail project or what is happening in a hospital. In the developing world, we need to invest in ensuring that we have the right kind of beneficiary feedback, because it is the people on the ground who know more, and we will improve only if we listen.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): Last week, the Select Committee on International Development published our first report of the Parliament on global education. I urge the Government to respond soon to our recommendation that we should fully fund replenishment of the Global Partnership for Education and to make that announcement as early as possible.

Rory Stewart: We will be announcing the refresh of our education policy early next year. The key thing, on which we agree absolutely with the Select Committee, is to drive up the quality of education. Attendance is right up, but far too many children are coming out entirely illiterate.

11. [902628] David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Is the Minister convinced that expenditure on private schools in Africa is the best use of public money and provides the best outcomes, given the report published recently by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg)?

Rory Stewart: Ninety-five per cent. of all our education spending goes to public education. However, there is a place, in particular in some of the poorest and most remote parts of the world, for recognising that the private sector is filling with low-cost education a hole that the public sector sometimes cannot fill.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): What assessment has the Department made of the value for money of its spending in Bangladesh to help the Rohingya people, particularly given the Secretary of State’s recent visit to the area?

Rory Stewart: Our assessment is that our humanitarian assistance in Bangladesh, which at the moment amounts to more than £40 million, is carefully monitored and well spent. It is focused, above all, on providing shelter and protection, particularly protection against sexual violence in conflict.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): May I first welcome the Secretary of State to her new post? May I also welcome the Moderator of the Church of Scotland to the Gallery?

There is no greater value for money in aid spending than protecting the future of our natural world for generations to come. Following the UN COP23 talks earlier this month, which I attended, it is undeniable that we are reaching the tipping point of no return on climate change, and all nations agreed that we must go “further, faster, together”. Given that the Department for International Development is a major shareholder in the World Bank, which still spends much more on oil, gas and coal than on clean energy, will the Secretary of State give me her personal commitment that she will use all her powers of persuasion with the World Bank to ensure that it invests more in clean, safe renewables than in fossil fuels?

Rory Stewart: The hon. Gentleman and I have discussed this in the past, and I pay tribute to the work that he does on the environment. We are pressing the World Bank to do that, and that is one of the functions of the new financing facilities that we have established, but there is still a place for non-renewable energy generation, particularly to meet the desperate needs in Africa.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): One of the best ways to spend money is on malaria, as I have seen as chair of the all-party group on malaria. The “World Malaria Report” is released today, and it shows a worrying stall in progress on malaria. Could my hon. Friend commit the UK Government to ensuring that as much as possible is done to make further progress?

Rory Stewart: That is a very important issue, in which the UK Government are proud to have invested heavily, along with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the US Government, who have done a lot on this. There is, I believe, an event in Speaker’s House immediately after this to commemorate some of the progress that is being made on malaria, but my hon. Friend is absolutely correct that this is an issue on which we need to do much more, and the fact is that progress is stalling.

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Secretary of State to her new role, and I look forward to our exchanges across the Dispatch Box. The Secretary of State’s predecessor resigned because she was caught trying to give aid money to the Israeli defence forces. Securitisation and militarisation of the aid budget, which is supposed to go to the world’s poorest, seem to be the new normal under this Government. What are the Secretary of State’s plans on spending aid money on military and the police, and will the spending go up or down?

Rory Stewart: It is absolutely central to remember that we must address the root causes of poverty, and a lot of those lie in fragile and conflict-affected states. If we try to separate off the work we do on education,
health and humanitarian assistance from the political and military drivers of conflict, we will never resolve these problems. But we absolutely take on board the fact that our prime responsibility is towards the poorest in the world. Our programmes on conflict are a means to an end, not an end in themselves. I would like to ask the hon. Lady: who made the 0.7% target? It is absolutely central that we do these things together.

Kate Osamor: I thank the Minister for his response, but new figures show that in 2016 aid spending on the £1 billion conflict stability and security fund increased by £27 million. That was spent mainly through the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on propping up the military and police in places such as Bahrain, Ethiopia and Syria. With no scrutiny from DFID or Parliament’s Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, how can we measure the impact? Does the Minister believe that this is value for money?

Rory Stewart: I absolutely believe it is value for money. There are currently 23 million people at risk of starvation in north-east Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan and Yemen. The reason why they are at risk of starvation is conflict. These are not natural disasters; they are driven by conflict. Unless we find political solutions to these conflicts, we will have 23 million people continuing to die throughout the world. We will not apologise for our approach, because it is a central part of our development policy.

Modern Slavery

6. Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to tackle modern slavery in developing countries.

The Secretary of State for International Development (Penny Mordaunt): The Department is playing a leading role in the cross-government effort to tackle the scourge of modern slavery, and expanding our work in developing countries to tackle this barbaric crime. Our “work in freedom” programme has already reached over 380,000 women and girls in south Asia and the middle east.

Paul Masterton: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer and I welcome her to her position. Saturday was International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. Given that around 75% of victims of modern slavery are women, will she join me in paying tribute to campaigners and organisations across the country, including the Women’s Aid refuge in Barrhead in my constituency, for what they do to tackle this crime?

Penny Mordaunt: I would be very happy to congratulate my hon. Friend’s constituents for the work that they are doing. Modern slavery is something that many people across the country are concerned about. We should be proud that our country and our Prime Minister are leading the way, most recently in convening leaders at the UN to launch the call for action to end modern slavery, which now has 40 signatories.

Topical Questions

T1. [902647] Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for International Development (Penny Mordaunt): I have just returned from Bangladesh, where I saw for myself the Rohingya camp and heard from refugees of the horrific atrocities that they have endured. I applaud the generosity of the Bangladeshi Government and the people of Bangladesh, as well as British taxpayers and all who have donated to the Disasters Emergency Committee’s appeal. Although every refugee has expressed the desire to return home, I have made it clear to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina that any returns must be voluntary, safe and sustainable. Those conditions are far from being met.

Stephen Gethins: As in Bangladesh and Burma, the humanitarian crisis unfolding in Yemen is a man-made one. The Secretary of State talked about having influence on the perpetrators of that conflict. With the tax take from arms sales now outstripping the level of aid, does she not think the time has come to stop arms sales to the combatants in that conflict?

Penny Mordaunt: I will say it for the third time: there are genuine security concerns on the part of the Saudi-led coalition, but that is entirely separate from the issue of allowing aid and commercial supplies into ports. We think that they can address their security concerns, and we are prepared to assist them in some measure to do that, but there is no excuse, legitimate though their concerns are, for stopping food and supplies getting to the individuals who need them.

T2. [902648] Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): British non-governmental organisations are now the largest recipients of grant funding through the EU’s ECHO humanitarian programme, precisely because they are very good at what they do. Will the Secretary of State look at ways of continuing a relationship with ECHO once we leave the EU, so that our NGOs can have stable funding to continue to do their important work in fragile states?

Penny Mordaunt: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right: our NGOs are second to none. If we are going to continue to make our funds deliver, provide value for money and have the impact required, British NGOs still need to be delivering that aid. All this will be part of the negotiations, but I concur exactly with my right hon. Friend’s sentiments.

T4. [902650] Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): What recent discussions has the Department had with United Nations Women on the UK Government’s contribution to its core funding?

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Alistair Burt): Support to protect women and girls, whether in relation to education, sanitation or refugees, has been a significant part of the work DFID is doing. We are constantly in contact with UN agencies about what more can be done both for women in conflict and for women in developing countries, and that is a major part of DFID’s programme.

T3. [902649] Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Will the Government ensure that their aid focuses on projects to improve sanitation and infection control to reduce the need to use antibiotics, as part of our global commitment to tackle antimicrobial resistance?
Alistair Burt: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Reducing the transmission of infection is an effective way of decreasing the need for antibiotics. Our approach is to strengthen national health systems to address infection prevention and control, and this includes hygiene and sanitation in health facilities.

T5. [902651] Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): The House will be aware that this Friday marks World AIDS Day. Will the Minister tell us what the Department is going to do to build on this country’s expertise and investment to date to ensure that critical AIDS vaccines are delivered to Africa?

Alistair Burt: I am pleased to join the hon. Gentleman, and I am sure the whole House, in commemorating World AIDS Day. We have been a long-term supporter of the international AIDS vaccine initiative, and we are the largest international funder of HIV prevention, care and treatment. From the £1.1 billion going into the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, 1.3 million retroviral drugs will be provided through the UK this year. There will be no let-up in the fight, and we are united on that. 1

T7. [902653] Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): Following the recent resignation of Robert Mugabe, will my hon. Friend outline what reviews the Department will be taking of the provision of UK aid to help Zimbabwe to secure a positive and prosperous future?

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Rory Stewart): I have recently returned from a visit to Zimbabwe. These are early days, and we need to watch very carefully what kinds of economic and political reforms are introduced by Mr Mnangagwa’s Government. However, if such reforms are forthcoming, there is a great deal that the British Government can do: first, in supporting governance reform; secondly, in supporting the business climate; and thirdly, in getting International Monetary Fund support for the Government of Zimbabwe.

T6. [902652] Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): On Monday evening, the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow presented its excellent report on “Global Citizenship in the Scottish Health Service”. [Interruption.] What discussions have taken place between DFID and health service officials across the UK about harnessing the huge mutual benefits of supporting health staff to volunteer overseas? [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I hope the Secretary of State heard that question amidst the clubbable hubbub. It is very important that the question be heard, otherwise the hon. Lady will have to blurt it out again.

Penny Mordaunt: If this answer is not satisfactory because I did not hear the hon. Lady’s question, please will she let me know? We are looking to refresh a number of schemes, including the International Citizen Service, and at what healthcare professionals and other professions can offer with regard to aid while enhancing their own personal professional development.

T8. [902654] Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I recently hosted a meeting with the China-Britain Council to explore opportunities for developing markets. What discussions are taking place between the Department for International Trade and DFID to ensure that trade joins aid as a way to help the developing world?

Penny Mordaunt: We have close discussions with our colleagues at the Department for International Trade. The trade and aid programme has enabled more than 40 countries to put development at the heart of their own plans.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I recently visited young Send My Friend to School campaigners at Sydenham School in my constituency. They spoke with great passion about the need for global education and why greater financing for education matters to them. What action will the Secretary of State take to ensure that this Government listen to those young people and show leadership by increasing funding for education through the Global Partnership for Education?

Alistair Burt: We were and are the largest founder contributor to the Global Partnership for Education. With 387 million children expected to leave primary school unable to read, there is no doubt that the continuing efforts of the United Kingdom, along with others in the partnership, are important. As my hon. Friend the Minister of State said earlier, we will publish a refreshed education strategy early in the new year. The hon. Lady can be sure that strengthening education systems around the world, and supporting teachers and children who may be marginalised through missing out on education, will be key parts of that.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I recently visited some schools in Africa where, in classrooms of more than 100 pupils, those with special educational needs, right at the back, had very little chance of accessing education. How will my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State—I congratulate her on her new position—prioritise disability support in education in developing countries?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this subject, which is very close to my heart. He will not have long to wait—perhaps it will be a matter of hours—for my first announcement on how the DFID budget will support disability.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [902632] Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 29 November.

The First Secretary of State and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Damian Green): I have been asked to reply on behalf of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, who is abroad in the middle east furthering our interests in a region that is fundamental to our national security and prosperity.

1. [Official Report, 4 December 2017, Vol. 632, c. 3-4MC.]
I am sure that the whole House will wish to join me in offering our warmest congratulations to His Royal Highness Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, and in wishing them every happiness in the future.

Today also marks the 100th anniversary of the creation of the RAF. The whole House will want to express our thanks for a century of service to this country.

Melanie Onn: I add my congratulations to those of the First Secretary of State to Prince Harry on his engagement.

Thanks to the outstanding efforts of the Labour-run North East Lincolnshire Council, the Government have included the Greater Grimsby project in their industrial strategy document, but we need more than a byline in a glossy magazine to make its potential a reality. When can we expect the Government to put their money where their mouth is, so that we can get going?

Damian Green: I welcome the fact that the hon. Lady welcomes the industrial strategy, as she should do. It will be good for Grimsby and many other communities around this country, particularly those that feel that they have been left behind in the past. I am happy to assure her that the industrial strategy will come with money attached, as she will have heard in my right hon. Friend the Chancellor’s Budget statement.

Q. [902637] Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): Making a success of the South Tees mayoral development corporation is vital for Teesside, and I was delighted to welcome the Prime Minister to my constituency this summer. Will the First Secretary of State join me in recognising the scale of the opportunity represented by the MDC, agree that it offers a chance to redefine Teesside to the world and commit that the new money awarded in the Budget is only the start of the process of delivering on its huge potential for change?

Damian Green: I can see that my hon. Friend is getting the hang of questions already. I am happy to assure him that we are committed to working with him, and indeed with the Tees Valley Mayor, Ben Houchen, who is doing so much to help develop the area. We want to support him and the South Tees Development Corporation on the work they are doing on the long-term regeneration of the south Tees area. As he said, the Chancellor announced £123 million of new funding in the Budget, because we recognise the significant economic opportunities in the area.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Let me join the First Secretary of State in congratulating the RAF on its anniversary, and in congratulating Prince Harry and Meghan Markle on their engagement—that is one Anglo-American couple that we in the Opposition will be delighted to see holding hands. I am sure that Prince Harry, as the patron of Rugby League, will be joining all of us in supporting the England team in the world cup final on Saturday—I, for one, will of course be waving my St George’s flag.

On a much sadder note, I am sure that the whole House will join me in sending our thoughts to all who killed and injured in Friday’s horrific attack on the mosque in north Sinai. It is a bitter reminder that the vast majority of the victims of jihadi terror are Muslims.

Before I get on with my questions, can I ask the First Secretary of State about a simple point of principle? Is he happy to be held to the same standards in government that he required of others while in opposition?

Damian Green: Yes, I am. I think that all Ministers should respect and obey the ministerial code, and I absolutely think that is a very important part of confidence in public life. I also echo the right hon. Lady’s thoughts about the terrible events in Sinai. She might find it difficult to wave the St George’s flag, but I will be doing so for the English rugby league team. [Interruption.] As a Welsh rugby fan, I might find it even more difficult than she does.

Emily Thornberry: The First Secretary of State looked rather perturbed at my line of questioning, but he does not need to worry; I really am not going there. I was merely wondering whether he remembered the question he asked at Prime Minister’s questions almost 17 years ago, when John Prescott stood in for Tony Blair, and whether he could answer the same question today. The question was this:

what percentage of the new nurses recruited in the past 12 months are now working full time?”—[Official Report, 13 December 2000, Vol. 359, c. 630.]

Damian Green: I cannot remember asking that question, but I would love to know what the then Deputy Prime Minister answered. I am happy to assure the right hon. Lady that we have more nurses, more midwives and more doctors working in the health service now. The health service is performing more operations now, and certainly more than it was 17 years ago. In particular, in the Budget last week my right hon. Friend the Chancellor was able to announce more than £6 billion extra on health spending, which will make the health service even stronger in future than it is now.

Emily Thornberry: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that response, but since he failed to answer my original question, I will do it for him. According to the Government’s latest figures, more than 40% of newly recruited nurses are leaving full-time employment within their first year. It is not just new recruits who are quitting; the overall number of NHS nurses and health visitors is down by 1,500 this year. The numbers are now lower than when this Government came to office. Why does he think that so many nurses are leaving?

Damian Green: There are, as I say, more operations being done, and more nurses, more doctors, more midwives. The health service is expanding. We have got 14,900 more doctors, 1,500 more medical school places each year and 10,000 more nurses on our wards, and we have announced an increase of more than 5,000 extra nurse training places every year. In addition, the Chancellor said in his Budget that we would commit to making sure that the nurses’ pay increase, the action for change— [Interruption.] The “Agenda for Change” staffing covered would not come out of other health spending. So nurses can be reassured that the Government will continue to support them both on pay and in terms of numbers. That is why our health service in England is getting better. If the right hon. Lady wants to look at a health service where things are getting worse, she can look to the Labour Government in Wales, and she does not
need to take it from me; she can take it from the public, because public satisfaction with the NHS in Wales is lower than in England. That is the effect of a Labour Government on health services.

**Emily Thornberry:** I hate to break it to the First Secretary, but there are more nurses in the NHS than just those working in emergency and acute wards, including district nurses, the number of whom has halved under the Tories. And guess who picks up the slack if those nurses are not there? It is nurses in emergency and acute care. I asked why so many nurses were leaving the vocation they loved. According to the Royal College of Nursing, the top four reasons are excess workload, staff shortages, low pay, and worries about patient care. According to the Government’s own figures, the number of nurses quitting because of worries about their finances or health has doubled since the Tories first froze their pay. So let us get on to the question—the question he asked John Prescott 17 years ago. The First Secretary said then that nurses at his local hospital were warning that “staff shortages are putting patients’ lives at risk”—[Official Report, 13 December 2000; Vol. 359, c. 630.]

What are those same nurses telling him today?

**Damian Green:** Since 17 years ago—and it is interesting that 17 years ago many years of Labour Government still lay ahead, with all the pressures the right hon. Lady has just exposed—the number of nurses in post has risen significantly. I did not quite understand her point about wards—she seemed to go on and off the wards—but we know that we have 10,000 more nurses on our wards, which is where people want to see them. Also, if she is interested in nurses’ pay, I hope that she will find it in herself to welcome the tax cut announced in the Budget—[Interruption.]

“Severe staff shortages in medical and nursing staff”, meaning that patient safety is being put at risk, and the only option to tackle those shortages is to cancel outpatient clinics? And it gets worse: there is to be a public meeting tomorrow to consider closing his local A&E for good—in other words, all the things he has been denying. What are you doing to our NHS? Is it happening on your own doorstep. Is it not about time he got a grip?

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I am entirely innocent in this matter.

**Damian Green:** The right hon. Lady’s grasp of the facts is pretty shaky. The meeting tomorrow in my constituency is about the strategic transformation plan. [Interruption.]

**Mr Speaker:** Order.
Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): May I join the First Secretary in congratulating Prince Harry and Meghan on their engagement, and wish them a long life and happiness together? May I also welcome the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, the Right Reverend Derek Brown, who is with us in the Gallery today?

Will the First Secretary of State now tell the House how much money the UK Government have received from Saudi Arabia as a result of arms sales since the war in Yemen began?

Damian Green: I am afraid that I do not have the figure to hand. However, I urge the right hon. Gentleman to recognise that our defence industry is an extremely important creator of jobs and prosperity, in Scotland as well as in other parts of the country. Obviously I am aware of the current terrible situation in Yemen, but he should also recognise that this country has one of the most rigorous and robust defence sales regimes in the world, as was recognised in a court case last July—and we are absolutely determined to maintain the most rigorous and robust system because that is the right thing to do, both for our prosperity and to ensure that we keep proper control of arms sales.

Ian Blackford: That was a long time to be unable to answer the question. I can tell the First Secretary that the UK Government have received £4.6 billion from selling arms to Saudi Arabia since the war in Yemen began—a war that has created a devastating humanitarian crisis. Yemen is now on the brink of famine, and UNICEF has said that 150,000 children will die by the end of the year. Does the First Secretary not agree that the best thing the Prime Minister can do in her meetings today is follow the example of the Netherlands and suspend licences for arms sales to Saudi Arabia to stop killing children?

Damian Green: I should correct something the right hon. Gentleman said: that the Government receive the money. It will be the companies that receive the money, and therefore their workers. He can take that position if he wants, and it was the Labour party’s position as well, but that would certainly entail significant job losses.

It is very important not only that we have the robust regime I talked about, but that we continue the humanitarian efforts that we make to try to alleviate the terrible conditions in Yemen. We are the fourth largest humanitarian donor to Yemen, and the second largest to the UN appeal. I also remind the right hon. Gentleman that the involvement of the Saudis in this conflict came at the request of the legitimate Government of Yemen and has UN Security Council backing. That is why we support it. This is a conflict supported by the UN Security Council, and I would hope that the right hon. Gentleman will have some respect for the Security Council.

Q14. [902646] Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): This Government’s ambition to build more homes is welcome, especially among those struggling to get on the housing ladder, and Taunton Deane is playing its part. With its garden town status, we must have homes that are good places to live—energy-efficient, sustainable drainage, green spaces, and maybe even, Mr Speaker, where there are showers, no shower gels with microbeads. However, we must also have the right roads in these developments. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the housing infrastructure fund is key to unlocking funds for vital roads such as the spine road through Staplegrove in Taunton?

Damian Green: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I know what a stout champion she is of the people of Taunton Deane. She is right about the housing infrastructure fund as well. We need more homes, but we also need the infrastructure to back them up, and that is why the Chancellor doubled the housing infrastructure fund in the Budget.

Q2. [902633] Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): As the First Secretary of State will know, being my near neighbour in Kent, as a result of underfunding the Conservative county council has run out of cash and is cutting the funding of buses in Kent by 70%. Four hospital buses, 14 school buses and over 100 other routes are to be cut. Thousands of pensioners, especially in rural areas, are to be trapped at home. Does the right hon. Gentleman, the Member for Ashford, really support such cuts?

Damian Green: I do not recognise the characterisation of Kent County Council’s position that my constituency neighbour has expressed. All local authorities, as all parts of the public sector, have to live within their means, because we have to continue paying down the deficit run up by the previous Labour Government. Kent County Council is an extremely good county council that does many good things in transport and other fields for the people of Kent, and will continue to do so.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, for decades now, the richer member states in the European Union have made large contributions to the EU budget because the macroeconomic benefits of belonging to the large free trade area of the single market make it a bargain to pay that share of the costs? Should we not therefore welcome the rumours in today’s press of a possible imminent settlement of the method of calculating future contributions, which may now enable us to get on with the serious negotiations about how we retain the maximum future access to all those benefits of that free trade?

Damian Green: My right hon. and learned Friend has been around long enough to know not necessarily to believe everything he reads in the newspapers, and it would clearly be wrong for me to go into figures now, but he is absolutely right that what we are about, and what my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union is about, is making sure we get the best possible deal at this stage of the process, so we can move on to the trade talks. Britain, as a country that meets its international obligations, of course will, as it exits the EU, meet the obligations and have all the rights that we have in that process, so that we can maintain a deep and special partnership with the other 27 members of the EU, as we move forward in friendship and co-operation after we have left the EU.

Q3. [902634] John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): Being believed, reliving trauma, fear of publicity, and a culture of denial are some of the reasons why very many women are reluctant to report rape, assault and sexual harassment. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that Government and Parliament need to lead by example? Will he, on behalf of the Government, apologise to the victims that Parliament and the Government have been letting down?
Damian Green: I absolutely agree that this place as an institution and all the political parties need to improve complaints procedures and other aspects of the culture of politics to ensure that young men and young women who are interested in politics do not in any way feel deterred from playing an active role in it. There is a place for everyone in this House, on all sides and in all parties, and among the House authorities, to ensure that this is the best possible working environment for young people to come into.

Ms Nadine Dorries (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): Many mothers in this Chamber know how hard childbirth can be, but we would never use that knowledge in a veiled threat against a journalist, in the way that the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) did when being questioned by a Channel 4 journalist recently. As I assume that the First Secretary is not pregnant, will he please complete the work that that journalist tried to do, by asking the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn to use her influence with her aunt, who is the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, whose regime is responsible for the kidnapping of Ahmad Bin Quasem, to ask for his release?

Damian Green rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Before the First Secretary replies, I am sure that the—[Interruption.] Order. I am sure that the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries) notified the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) of an intention to refer to her in this question—

Ms Dorries indicated dissent.

Mr Speaker: She did not? Well, that was disorderly—[Interruption.] Order. Nevertheless, the question has been asked and it would be perfectly proper for the First Secretary briefly to reply.

Damian Green: Mr Speaker, you and the House will be aware that I can speak only on behalf of the Government. I can assure my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries) that Bangladesh remains an important human rights priority area for the Foreign Office and that we continue to raise allegations of enforced disappearances at all levels of the Government of Bangladesh. I think I should stop there.

Q4.  [902635] Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): At the present rate of progress, it will take the three officials at the First Secretary’s old Department more than 70 years to investigate the claims of around 4,500 WASPI women who are being deprived of their state pension. I know that this Government are slow, but is this not adding insult to injury?

Damian Green: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Government committed a sum of more than £1 billion to ensure that no one’s pension would be delayed more than 18 months from the original period. I am sure that he also, as a reasonable man, recognises that, with increasing longevity, it is inevitable that the pension age will rise. That is what this Government are doing, and by next year pension inequality will have been removed. We will hit 65 for both sexes next year, and that means that we will then have an equal pension system.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): The Royal Air Force is unique among the three services in having been established by an Act of Parliament, which received Royal Assent 100 years ago today. Will my right hon. Friend find time in his busy diary to join me and Members of both Houses and staff from throughout the Palace in celebrating the magnificent service that the RAF has given to this nation over that 100 years, at a unique parade in the atrium of Portcullis House at 7.30 this evening by the Queen’s Colour Squadron?

Damian Green: I have already mentioned the centenary today, and my hon. Friend is right to bring it up again. We cannot pay high enough tribute to the men and women of the RAF for a century of service that will go on for a long time into the future as well. I am glad that he has managed to get an advert in for the parade this evening in Portcullis House.

Q6.  [902638] Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): The United Kingdom has lost its seat on the International Court of Justice, EU agencies are pulling out of London, and there will be no more European capitals of culture in the UK. Is the sun setting on empire 2.0 before it has even begun?

Damian Green: It is not really surprising that EU institutions are not going to be in a state that is not a member of the EU. That cannot come as a surprise to the hon. Gentleman. As for the capitals of culture, I rather agree with him. After British cities, including some in Scotland, were invited to be part of the process, it is extremely disappointing that the Commission has decided that they cannot apply. We are in urgent talks with the Commission about that, and we are ensuring that all the cities that applied can continue with their cultural development, which has been shown to be an extremely good basis for the regeneration of cities and towns across the United Kingdom.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): This Saturday, I will be announcing the winners of my annual local shop competition as part of Small Business Saturday. Will my right hon. Friend wish all Cannock Chase retailers the best of luck and will he congratulate the winners?

Damian Green: I am very happy to join my hon. Friend in congratulating her retailers. Like many Members, I will be celebrating Small Business Saturday this weekend. It has become an extremely important part of the calendar. Supporting small business is absolutely at the heart of this Government’s economic strategy, and we should take every opportunity to celebrate the hugely important work that small businesses do in innovation, in entrepreneurship and in serving the people.

Q7.  [902639] Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): Today, we see shocking new figures that child knife deaths are nearing a 40-year high. The Prime Minister promised action five months ago, but she has failed to deliver. There was nothing in the Budget for policing and nothing meaningful to tackle the causes as well as the crime. It is clear that we need intervention now and not just from the Home Office. Funding youth workers in major trauma centres is proven to get young people out of the cycle of violence, and it would cost £6 million a
year to fund. Will the First Secretary establish a cross-Government programme of action to make good on the Prime Minister’s promise?

**Damian Green**: I am sure that the hon. Lady is aware that this Government’s stance on knife crime is actually tougher than ever. We have made the punishment for repeat offenders stronger, and we have banned cautions for the most serious offences. There is now a very clear message: if you carry knives in public, you are more likely than ever to go to prison. The latest figures show that 42% of adult offenders were given an immediate custodial sentence—the highest rate in nearly a decade—so I hope that she can be reassured that this Government are actually being tougher on knife crime than any previous Government.

**Nadhim Zahawi** (Stratford-on-Avon) (Con): Does the First Secretary agree that we do not need to break into the computer or iPad of the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) to work out that the half a trillion pounds that he wants to borrow will attract £7.5 billion of interest payments every year?

**Mr Speaker**: Order. The one difficulty with that otherwise ingenious question is that it bears no relation to Government policy, for which the First Secretary is responsible, and relates instead to the policies of the shadow Chancellor, for which he is not.

**Q8. [902640] Wayne David** (Caerphilly) (Lab): Sharon Jones is a constituent who had a malignant brain tumour removed some 20 years ago, leaving her with excruciating headaches and severe pain in her neck and shoulders. Sharon has been in receipt of employment and support allowance, and the Department for Work and Pensions accepts that Sharon is not fit for work. However, she has now been placed in the work-related activity group and her benefit has been reduced. Will the First Secretary justify that to Sharon?

**Damian Green**: Obviously, I cannot be aware of the individual issues in that case, but I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions will be happy to consider that case to see whether something needs to be done for Sharon.

**John Stevenson** (Carlisle) (Con): I very much welcome the announcement of the borderlands growth deal, which is positive news for the border area. Can the First Secretary assure me that this initiative will receive sufficient resource to ensure its success?

**Damian Green**: I share my hon. Friend’s enthusiasm for the borderlands growth initiative. I have seen the many benefits of city deals and growth deals around all parts of the United Kingdom since I became First Secretary. The borderlands growth initiative is particularly important because it will show the mutual prosperity of his part of the north of England and the southern part of Scotland. All I can say is that, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland is the MP for a constituency in the southern part of Scotland, I know this deal will get particularly strict attention inside the Cabinet.

**Q9. [902641] Tommy Sheppard** (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Does the First Secretary agree with the Lord Speaker’s committee that the House of Lords should be reduced to 600 and that the term should be limited to 15 years? Does he not feel the slightest sense of embarrassment that the crisis of credibility in the undemocratic upper Chamber has become so acute that its Members are themselves begging for reform while the elected Government refuse to act?

**Damian Green**: When the hon. Gentleman says that all Members of the House of Lords are begging for reform, he may not necessarily be representing the entire range of views in another place, but I am happy to assure him that the Government are looking very carefully at the proposal of the Burns committee. We will, of course, respond in due course.

**Damian Collins** (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend and constituency neighbour say what action the Government propose to take against Russian-backed agencies that are spreading fake news and disinformation? We know they have been doing it in our political campaigns, but there are also worrying reports that disinformation may be being spread on important issues such as accessing vaccines and the flu jab.

**Damian Green**: My hon. Friend is right to raise cyber-security, which is an extremely important issue, and fake news and the dissemination of potentially dangerous information is one part of that. The National Cyber Security Centre is looking very hard at the issue, and it is taking a number of measures to combat it, some of which obviously have to remain private. I absolutely assure him that the issue is very high on the agenda of the National Cyber Security Centre, which is just over a year old and which is doing very good work in ensuring that the whole area of cyber-security is much better than it used to be.

**Q10. [902642] Wes Streeting** (Ilford North) (Lab): An 11-year-old primary school pupil approached me to tell me that he, his mother and his two brothers live in a single room in a bedsit in Ilford and to ask whether I could find him a council flat like the one in which I grew up. What is heartbreaking is that I know, and the First Secretary will know, it is very unlikely he will ever have one. Given that the measures announced in last week’s so-called housing Budget will not solve the scale of the problem that sees more than 100,000 children living in temporary accommodation, what will the First Secretary do to make sure that that boy, his family and every other child living in a bedsit or in temporary bed-and-breakfast accommodation gets the decent home they need and that they can call their own?

**Damian Green**: I absolutely agree that this is a serious problem, and it is one of the reasons why housing was at the centre of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor’s Budget.

**Emily Thornberry**: What are you doing, then?

**Damian Green**: I see the right hon. Lady has recovered her voice. I will tell her what we are doing. Last year we delivered more homes than were delivered in all but one
of the last 30 years—217,000, which takes us to 1.1 million since 2010. Over the next five years we will invest £44 billion in home building, boosting the funding for council, social and low-cost housing to over £9 billion. We are building more social housing than the Labour Government did in their 13 years in office. We will build even more in the future. This is a Government who are addressing the problems of the constituents of the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting); previous Labour Governments signally failed to do so.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): At the recent extremely successful Cheltenham literature festival, Hillary Clinton talked about the importance of ensuring that the Russians are not allowed to meddle in British or, indeed, American elections. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we should be building an offensive cyber capability so that our opponents know we have the will and the wherewithal to strike back?

Damian Green: My hon. Friend is exactly right, as we would expect, given that he is the Member of Parliament who represents GCHQ; he is absolutely right about the offensive capacity we may well need in the cyber area, and I am happy to assure him and the House that we are indeed developing that.

Q12. [902644] Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): Without mentioning the new state pension or apprenticeships, without stating the falsehood that the Scottish Government can somehow fix the problem, and given that the Prime Minister is a WASPI woman herself, how can the First Minister justify a rise of 413% and given that the Prime Minister is a WASPI woman herself, how can the First Minister justify a rise of 413% in the number of women over the age of 60 in receipt of employment and support allowance because of this?

Damian Green: I said this in reply to a previous question on this subject, but I hope the hon. Lady would recognise the principle, which is right: that as we live longer we need to move up the pension age. She knows as well as I do that the Scottish Government do have the capacity to top up welfare payments. Scottish National party Members like to sit here and deny that, but in Holyrood they know they could do this. So, as ever with the SNP, they should stop simply moaning in this Chamber; they should go back to their own Government in Scotland and say that if they want to do something, they should do it. They should get on with the day job of running Scotland.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I very much welcome the Government’s modern industrial strategy, which was launched this week. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is really going to be important, we benefit commercially from that for decades to come. That is the route to rising productivity and rising prosperity.

Q13. [902645] Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): This Sunday, 3 December, is the United Nations International Day of Persons with Disabilities. So far, the Government have refused to carry out a cumulative impact assessment of their social security policies on people living with a disability. Will the First Secretary now mark this day by doing the right thing for disabled people and carrying out a full cumulative impact assessment?

Damian Green: I am sure the hon. Lady, who has great expertise in this field, will know that this Government are spending £90 billion on disability benefits. More to the point, we are being more successful than ever before in giving disabled people a degree of independence. Hundreds of thousands more disabled people are in work than have ever been before. We have a plan to have an extra million in work over the next 10 years. That is an extremely important and practical way to improve the lives of hundreds of thousands of disabled people. That is what this Government are doing, and that is what we will continue to do.

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): Given that President Rouhani of Iran has said that his will not be the first country to breach the joint comprehensive plan of action, will the First Secretary assure us that British diplomats are working hard in Washington DC to persuade our American friends that it is in the interests of the west and of Iran to uphold the JCPOA as an essential prelude to solving other regional problems?

Damian Green: My hon. Friend is right; we think that the JCPOA is a very important part of attempting to improve conditions, not just between Iran and its neighbours but across the wider middle east. We will continue to argue that case in all parts of the world.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I, too, join in offering congratulations to Prince Harry and Meghan Markle on their engagement. One issue that Prince Harry has rightly highlighted and campaigned on is mental health. The Invest in Life campaign in Northern Ireland is doing a fantastic job in highlighting the need for extra resources on that issue. We join in that campaign and have secured extra resources. But at a time when issues such as mental health, education and all the rest of it need to be prioritised in Northern Ireland by a locally devolved Government working on these issues and representing the people of Northern Ireland, does the First Secretary agree that it is a gross dereliction of responsibility for Sinn Féin to announce this week that it is not going to engage in further discussions on the restoration of devolution? If that is the case, we now need to move quickly to restore accountability and Ministers to Northern Ireland to get on with the people’s business of responsible government in Northern Ireland.

Damian Green: The right hon. Gentleman will know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is working as hard as possible to restore democratic control and to restore the Northern Ireland Executive. We all want to see proper devolved government restored in Northern Ireland. That would be by far the best thing for the people of Northern Ireland, and the Government will continue to work tirelessly to that end.
Points of Order

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Exceptionally, I will take the point of order now. [Interruption.] Will Members who are leaving the Chamber be good enough to do so quickly and quietly? It is quite unaccountable if they do not wish to hear the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), but there is no accounting for taste.

Stephen Doughty: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for exceptionally taking this point of order.

You and others in the House may not be aware of this, Mr Speaker, but it appears that the President of the United States has in recent moments been retweeting comments from a far-right organisation, Britain First. There are some highly inflammatory videos, including some posted by an individual who I believe has recently been arrested and charged in relation to certain serious offences. Have you had notice of any intended statement by the Home Secretary or the Foreign Secretary on this very serious matter?

Mr Speaker: I confess I have had no advance notice of this matter. I am not myself one who tends to follow what is said on Twitter, but the hon. Gentleman is almost invariably very well informed on these matters. The Home Secretary is in her place and if she wants to say anything, she is welcome to do so, but she is under absolutely no obligation whatsoever to do so.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd) indicated dissent.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab) rose—

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Lady is not hailing a taxi. Oh, very well—in deference to the seniority of the right hon. Lady in the House, if she has a point of order to raise, I will of course hear it.

Yvette Cooper: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I understand that the woman in question has indeed already been convicted of hate crime in this country. On that basis, given the significance and seriousness of the President of the United States giving her such a huge platform, do you think it would be appropriate for us to hear some word of condemnation from the Home Secretary or the Foreign Secretary?

Mr Speaker: Well, it is a point of order for the Chair, and I can say only to the right hon. Lady that, at the moment, as will be obvious to her and to the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth, I have received no advance notice of any intention to make a statement. It would be wrong to expect a Government Minister immediately to respond and, to be fair, the Home Secretary is under no obligation to do so. What I would say is that I now know the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth very well and, if anything, I know the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) even better, because we came into the House together 20 years ago. Knowing them as well as I do, I know that when they have got their teeth into something, they are disinclined to let go. By the way, that is a compliment. We will leave it there for now, but I rather imagine that this matter will probably be mentioned again.
Exiting the EU: Costs

12.48 pm

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op) (Urgent Question): To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer to update the House on the expected costs of exiting the European Union.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): Our negotiating team is currently in Brussels discussing our exit from the European Union—in fact, our officials have been working on it for months. It would be completely wrong of me to cut across those discussions by commenting on speculation about the financial settlement, and it would not be in our national interest.

The Prime Minister made it clear in her Florence speech that EU member states would not need to pay more, or to receive less money, over the remainder of the current budget period as a result of our decision to leave. She also made it clear that, in the spirit of our future partnership, the UK will honour its commitments made during its period of membership. As we have said before, nothing is agreed until everything is agreed. Any settlement that we make is contingent on us securing a suitable outcome, as outlined by the Prime Minister in her Florence speech. We will meet our commitments and also get a good deal for the UK taxpayer.

We want to see progress towards our preferred option, which is an implementation period followed by an ambitious future economic partnership. In the Budget, we have set aside £3 billion, in addition to the £700 million that we have already allocated, to make sure that our country is fully prepared for all eventualities. What we have seen today is simply media speculation. We will update the House when there is more detail to give.

Mr Leslie: The British people were promised a dividend from Brexit. They were told that leaving the EU would save us a fortune. Those who campaigned for Brexit daubed their hubris across the side of a giant red bus, promising a windfall of £350 million every week for the NHS. That was not just a whopping lie, but the direct opposite of the truth.

Will the Chief Secretary confirm that if the divorce bill comes in at somewhere between £40 billion and £67 billion, as is speculated, that could be a payment of £1,000 from every man, woman and child in this country? Is this speculated divorce bill not just the tip of the iceberg? If we are being honest about the true costs of Brexit, should we not also add in the lost revenues to the Exchequer set out in the Red Book—something in the order of £20 billion by 2021—the £3.7 billion of Brexit preparations for all the duplicated agencies, new border arrangements, lorry parks in Dover and so forth, and of course the higher cost of living for all of our constituents as prices keep on rising?

How do the Chief Secretary’s constituents react to the idea that they will be lumbered with all these extra costs? Do they not ask her, “What exactly are we getting for this? What wondrous new advantages will we gain by shelling out these astronomical sums?” Will she not be straight with the House that we are paying for the privilege of putting the world’s most efficient free trade, tariff-free, frictionless agreement into the bin, and being told to pay for the privilege of downgrading to an inferior deal with our European neighbours? Why is she being so coy about the deal that is being done? The Government have gone from “go whistle” to “where do we sign?”

In a week when the Government will still not fully publish the Brexit impact assessment papers to this House, we are now hearing rumours that Parliament and the public may never be told the full amount. When will Parliament be told what is actually happening and when will we get a vote on the sums of money involved? Will the Chief Secretary, right here and right now, scotch this nonsense that the true costs of Brexit will be hidden away in a convenient backroom deal in the negotiations? The British people need to know whether there is a deal and how much the Government have put on the table in the negotiations. If she will not tell us, why does she think that the only people who cannot be told are the British public and the British Parliament? This is not what the British public voted for in the referendum. It is not taking back control; it is losing control.

Elizabeth Truss: I can tell the hon. Gentleman what my constituents say: “The country has voted to leave the European Union.” What they want to see is us getting on with that and securing the best possible deal for Britain. If we look at the Opposition Benches, we can see Members who, like the hon. Gentleman, voted to stay in the single market and the customs union, and we also see Opposition Front Benchers who voted to leave the single market and the customs union. Today we read that the shadow Home Secretary wants a second referendum. That is not remotely helpful in securing the best possible deal.

The hon. Gentleman knows perfectly well that we are in negotiations as we speak. If we were to talk about numbers and aspects of the deal in this House, we would be cutting across our negotiating position. The people of Britain want us to get on with it, to take the advantages of leaving the European Union, to make the most of the opportunities and to secure the best possible deal. We are well on the way to doing that. I suggest that, rather than trying to relight the referendum battle, which is exactly what the hon. Gentleman seems to be doing, he needs to get with the programme and to start talking about how he can be helpful.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that no Government of any EU member state could possibly be expected to agree that we should have a good future trade and economic relationship with the European Union while, at the same time, we repudiate all our past financial obligations and somehow refuse to pay a fair share of the costs of agencies and so on that will be incurred in the future? Does she therefore agree that those who oppose paying any money presumably want a no-deal Brexit, which would be catastrophic for this country, and would stop the opportunity that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union has of negotiating a deal that retains as many benefits as possible for jobs, investment and the growth of this country’s economy?

Elizabeth Truss: As the Prime Minister laid out in her Florence speech, we do want to abide by the commitments we made during our period of membership, and we also want to see progress on securing a deal. My right hon.
and learned Friend is right that any settlement that we seek to achieve has to be contingent on getting a suitable outcome from the negotiations, as has been outlined by the Prime Minister, because we want to ensure that any money spent is value for money for the British taxpayer.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op):
I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie) for raising this critical question.

As we all know, settling this issue is vital to continuing to the next part of the negotiations. Given that progress has been so much slower than we would have hoped, the Opposition support efforts to resolve this part of the negotiations as soon as is feasible, so that we can start to make progress to end the uncertainty that is impacting on jobs and the economy.

The financial settlement with the EU must meet our international obligations while delivering a fair deal for British taxpayers. The UK is a responsible country and there is no mileage in our refusing to meet our obligations. If we are to negotiate a comprehensive new trade agreement with the European Union, which we will need for future jobs and prosperity, we must be seen as a country that can be trusted to comply with the deals that we reach.

Given our long-standing membership of the European Union, the calculation will understandably be complex. Given that this is a sensitive part of the negotiations, we appreciate that the Government cannot announce a figure publicly at this stage, but they must be transparent about the process, especially once an understanding has been reached with our EU partners. That is why we have tabled an amendment to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill that calls for any financial settlement to be assessed by the Office for Budget Responsibility and the National Audit Office, and for Parliament to have the chance to scrutinise it. The Government’s handling of the presentation of the impact assessment studies to Parliament has left a lot to be desired, so may I ask the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to promise that, in the interests of transparency and clarity, the Government will support that amendment?

Elizabeth Truss: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his supportive comments. I am glad that he agrees with the Government’s strategy. The next step will be making sure that his Back-Bench colleagues also agree with his strategy. He is absolutely right that we should not reveal the details of negotiations while they are ongoing. However, the Opposition’s approach of saying that any deal is better than no deal is not the best way of securing a deal. Although our preferred option is an implementation period followed by a strong agreement, we are preparing for all eventualities, which is why we are putting in £3 billion. I suggest that the Opposition should also support that very responsible approach.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I am not in favour of anything that is not legal, so I support my right hon. Friend completely. I am also in line with my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), in that whatever the legal agreement is, bound against the contingency of a free trade arrangement, it is exactly what the Government will set out to do. Will the Chief Secretary please remind those who have raised this question that even if we agreed a figure of something in the order of £40 billion over 40 years, because we will not be paying contributions to the European Union, it means that the UK Exchequer will be better off by £360 million in the course of those 40 years—a net gain, with a free trade arrangement?

Elizabeth Truss: My right hon. Friend makes a very fair point. Whatever happens, we will not be paying anything like what we would have paid as an EU member. That represents a considerable saving to the British taxpayer.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie) for bringing this matter to the House.

There would be no newspaper rumours about the sum if the Government actually told us what the sum was. Nobody voted for this disastrous, disorganised EU exit. People voted for £350 million a week for the NHS, not to spend £40 billion or £50 billion just to be worse off. Our public services must not pay the price for this Brexit mess. It surprised us all when the Prime Minister found a magic money tree earlier this year, so surely the Government cannot have been lucky enough to find two. Given that last week’s Budget did not make provision for this £40 billion or £50 billion, will the Chancellor now bring forward an emergency Budget to explain where he is finding the money?

Elizabeth Truss: When the hon. Lady stood up, I thought that she was going to thank the Government for the £2 billion additional spending power that we gave to the Scottish Government in the Budget, which they will no doubt be able to use to improve their public services. As I have said before—and, indeed, as has been pointed out by the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds)—talking about the money now would cut across the negotiations and prevent us from getting the best possible deal. That is not in anyone’s interests.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I am glad that the Government have confirmed today that they are carrying on with comprehensive preparations for no deal, because it is very important that we are not up against the clock at the end and forced into a bad deal because we have no alternative. Will the Chief Secretary confirm that no deal has the great advantage of no payments whatever under the divorce bill heading, meaning that when the Government recommend a deal, it has to be visibly better?

Elizabeth Truss: My right hon. Friend is correct. It is irresponsible for Opposition Front Benchers to suggest that any deal is better than no deal. That is the way that we will not get our preferred option, which is an implementation period plus our preferred economic partnership. We are allocating £3 billion to ensure that we are prepared for all eventualities.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The United Kingdom is currently a member of a large number of EU agencies, from that dealing with aviation safety to the European Medicines Agency. Have the Government made an assessment of the likely cost to the Exchequer of having to replicate all those functions and activities, if they eventually decide that we have to leave all of them
because of their stated principled objection to the European Court of Justice having any jurisdiction over the United Kingdom?

Elizabeth Truss: I have been very clear with the House that we are preparing for all eventualities. Of course, looking at the specifics of those agencies is a part of that.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): As my right hon. Friend pointed out, the Prime Minister made a fair and generous offer to the European Union in her Florence speech. Given that article 50 provides that the negotiations that are under way should take account of the future relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union, does my right hon. Friend agree that it is high time that the European Union reciprocated and started adhering to its obligations under the treaty?

Elizabeth Truss: As my right hon. Friend points out, it is important that we move on to the next stage of the negotiations and talk about our long-term relationship with the European Union once we have left. That is exactly what we seek to do.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The problem with the Chief Secretary’s answer is that all our constituents saw the slogan on the side of a bus. If the Government simply say nothing—if they keep radio silence for a long time—and then suddenly pluck a figure out of a hat at the end of the process, it will just be incomprehensible to everyone. Surely she can tell the House the kinds of things that the Government think they should be funding—pension contributions or whatever else—rather than just leaving everyone in the dark.

Elizabeth Truss: I refer the right hon. Lady to the Prime Minister’s Florence speech, in which she laid out the commitments that we want to continue to honour, in the spirit of our future partnership, after we have left the European Union. The right hon. Lady has to be aware that this is part of a discussion that is also about our future relationship, and all those elements are contingent on securing our future relationship, as the Prime Minister laid out in her Florence speech. It would be wrong at this stage—from the point of view of not only the negotiations, but transparency to the public—to lay out something before it is fully agreed. That would not be helpful.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): To cheer up the miseries on the Opposition Benches, perhaps they would like to look at the prospective budget published by Economists for Free Trade in the week before the Budget. It is a really exciting prospectus that says that our economy will grow at 3% a year by 2025, providing an infrastructure surplus of £60 billion, which easily covers the £18.2 billion a year for the famous £350 million. But that is contingent on reciprocal free trade with zero tariffs, so will my right hon. Friend guarantee that there will be no legally binding commitment to spend money until our partners agree to a serious free trade deal that is based on reciprocal free trade and zero tariffs?

Elizabeth Truss: I fear that my right hon. Friend is over-optimistic if he thinks we can stop Opposition Members from being miserable. We tried that over four days of Budget debate, but we have been unsuccessful so far. He is absolutely right to talk about the benefits of free trade for the British economy—I completely agree with him. We are seeking a good deal that benefits the UK in the long term.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): At least £45 billion, higher inflation and debt, an extra year of cuts, and less influence in the world are the price that the Government are willing to pay for a deluded vision of Great Britain post-Brexit. Is there any level of damage that the economy, jobs and families in the UK would have to sustain that would cause the Government to rethink and give the people a vote on the deal? That would be supported by the Liberal Democrats and Sadiq Khan, the London Mayor—and, as I understand it now, the shadow Home Secretary.

Elizabeth Truss: I see, regrettably, that the misery has spread to the Liberal Democrats; there seems to be a contagion on the Opposition Benches. I invite the right hon. Gentleman to welcome the fact that this country has the lowest unemployment in 40 years. We also have the third highest number of start-ups in the world—a record number for this country—and the other positive benefits that we are seeing due to the actions of this Conservative Government.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Most of us—certainly those of us on the Conservative Benches—accept that a good trade deal is better than no deal, that there is always give and take in a negotiation, and that it is important that we meet our financial commitments. However, does the Minister accept that this issue is largely a storm in a teacup, because nothing is agreed until everything is agreed? It is important to make that point and not to listen to the few siren voices who still refuse to accept the result of the referendum.

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is right. Regrettably, there are people—particularly on the Opposition Benches—who still do not seem to accept democracy and that fact that people did vote to leave the European Union.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The thing is that the Government are keeping their cards so close to their chest that I suspect they have not even looked at them themselves. For that matter, the left hand certainly does not know what the right hand is doing, because the Minister is obviously making it clear that we are going to pay lots of money for a no-deal outcome, yet the Foreign Secretary boldly and quite confidently told this House that our foreign counterparts could “go whistle”. What was he suggesting that they should whistle—“Stand and deliver your money or your life”?  

Elizabeth Truss: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that considerable work is taking place across Government, but it would be wrong to cut across our negotiators in the deal they are seeking to strike. It is in our country’s interests to reach the point where we are talking about our long-term economic relationship with the European Union.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): My right hon. Friend should not pay more than we owe, but she should be confident that, whatever that is, it is a bargain against the cost of staying in.

Elizabeth Truss: My right hon. Friend makes a good point. Were we to stay in, the costs would be considerably higher than any amount we are talking about as part of our negotiations.
Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): The Government are so intent on keeping information they have about Brexit secret that they are actually risking contempt of Parliament. As this even more secret financial settlement is negotiated, how can we be sure that it really represents the national interest?

Elizabeth Truss: As I have pointed out already, these negotiations are not yet complete—there is not a number that we can disclose to the House. Absolutely, when there is one, and when there is more detail to give, we will come to the House and talk about it.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, following a good Budget, and given the need for good housekeeping and the pressures on public spending, if the impression is given that we have no legal financial obligations? Does she not also agree that this is not a divorce bill? We are leaving a club, and once someone leaves a club, they no longer have to pay subscriptions.

Elizabeth Truss: First, we were able to make sure that we stuck within our fiscal rules at the Budget, making sure that debt is falling as a proportion of GDP for the first time in 13 years, and keeping within our deficit targets. At the same time, we were able to freeze fuel duty to help ordinary working people, who need to keep their living costs down. We were able to do all those things. The reality is that, as we leave the European Union, we will no longer be paying those vast sums in, and that will represent a benefit to the taxpayer.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Is the Minister aware that 70% of the people who voted in Bolsover voted to leave? But let me also say this to her: those same people in Bolsover, I believe, would expect me to tell the right hon. Lady from the finance Department that if the Government have £60 billion to spare, it should go to the national health service and social care.

Elizabeth Truss: The hon. Gentleman will be well aware that, as part of last week’s Budget, we were able to put additional money into the national health service—into hospital capital and making sure we hit our A&E targets—and we are also allocating money to help with nurses’ pay. The hon. Gentleman will no doubt be pleased about that.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): These negotiations remind me of the even more complex ones on arms reductions in the 1980s. Will the Minister bear it in mind that the lessons of those negotiations were, first, that too many one-sided concessions project an image of weakness and, secondly, that to get the very best deal, we often have to walk away first and wait for the other side to agree with us, come back, sit down and negotiate realistically?

Elizabeth Truss: It is because we need to make sure that the European Union is aware we have alternatives that we are preparing not only for our preferred option of a transition period plus a long-term economic agreement, but for a no-deal scenario. The Opposition want to give that option away, so we would not be able to have that discussion with the European Union.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): There are two salient features about the news that is emerging. The first is that this is the opposite of what was promised during the referendum. We were promised £350 million a week more, and now the Government are set to pay up to £50 billion, when our constituents urgently need money for health, housing, policing and much more. But, secondly, what is it that we are paying for? Other countries pay significant sums to get into the single market; we are lining up to pay up to £50 billion to leave the single market. Is not the tragedy that these huge sums are going to pay for a worse deal than we have at present? That is hardly strategic genius.

Elizabeth Truss: It is absolutely right that the UK honours its commitments in the spirit of our future partnership, but as I have said before, nothing is agreed until everything is agreed. We will expect to make progress and secure that long-term economic partnership, which will be to the benefit of UK citizens.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend note the growing concern at the fact that Her Majesty’s Government seem in these negotiations to be dancing to the tune of the European Commission? Further to the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson), may I also ask whether she can be certain that, after 29 March 2019, we will make no payments to the European Union whatever in the absence of a full agreement covering trade?

Elizabeth Truss: I can assure my hon. Friend that we are not dancing to anyone’s tune. What we care about is the future of Britain’s economy, protecting the British taxpayer from excess payments and making sure we secure a good deal, which is why it is so important that we do not discuss these numbers while we are in the middle of a very important negotiation.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I have been informed by a former public finances auditor that international accounting standard 37, on provisions, contingent liabilities and contingent assets, requires the UK Government to account for the divorce payment as expenditure in their public finances—even if the exact amount cannot be calculated. Given that the Government accounts for 2016-17 did not adequately disclose the potential liability, as required by IAS 37, will the Minister give assurances that a liability of this magnitude will now be included in the supplementary estimates for 2017-18 and that that provision will be subject to a vote of this House?

Elizabeth Truss: That would be wrong according to accounting principles, because nothing has been agreed. The Office for Budget Responsibility followed the Prime Minister’s Florence speech in laying out its projections for the Budget. I suggest to the hon. Gentleman that he has misinterpreted those standards.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that she agrees that the UK should pay the EU what we are legally obliged to pay—not a penny
more and not a penny less? If so, will she make sure that, before this House votes on the final bill, we have an itemised account of exactly what we are paying for at the end, and also the legal basis on which we are making those payments? I have to say that the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner) is absolutely right: if there is any spare money going at a time of austerity, it should be directed to our priorities in the UK; we should not give it as a bung to the European Union, which we are not legally obliged to do.

Elizabeth Truss: I can assure my hon. Friend that we are determined to get the best possible deal for the British taxpayer, and we need to look at the deal in the round to see what represents value for money. Absolutely, the money should be spent on our public services and on keeping taxes low for our hard-working citizens.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Last week, the Treasury published the Red Book, which showed that there would be no more payments to EU institutions from 2019. It also said there was £15 billion of headroom and that debt would then fall. Does the news overnight not show that there is a £30 billion hole in the public finances and that there is no possibility of debt falling on that timescale?

Elizabeth Truss: The hon. Lady is not correct about that. The OBR has made predictions on EU payments and those are included in the Budget. Indeed, that was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) in the Budget debate last week.

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): Will the Chief Secretary please confirm that any payments that are offered will be itemised, so that Parliament can understand the constitution of the payment and put it into the context of any likely conditioning that may be required in any deal on the future relationship?

Elizabeth Truss: I assure my hon. Friend that the payments that will potentially be made—as we have discussed, nothing is agreed until everything is agreed—will absolutely provide value for money.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie) is right in his question to highlight the serious difficulties the country faces. I hope it is true that agreement has been reached on the costs of exit, so that the negotiations can move on to the next stage. Does the right hon. Lady agree that it is essential to the UK’s national interest that the European Council agrees at its meeting next month that enough progress has been made to move on to discussions about future trade?

Elizabeth Truss: We absolutely want to secure movement on to the next stage of the negotiations. That is very important. Ultimately, it takes the UK and the EU27 to agree on that. It would be wrong to take the approach of the Opposition and say that we would agree to any deal, regardless of what it was. We have to look at and prepare for all eventualities.

Mr Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the message to the doom-mongers must be that the British public have given their verdict and expect Parliament to deliver? The doom-mongers should recognise that we are the fifth strongest economy in the world and that our population is significantly greater than that of 15 EU countries put together. It is high time that they started talking Britain up, rather than talking it down.

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is right. The Opposition refuse to see any of the positive things that are happening in our country, whether it is the lowest youth unemployment rate for over 13 years or the highest number of new start-ups this country has ever seen. Great things are happening, so let us see a bit more optimism from the Opposition.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): People in the Black country voted to leave, but they were not told at any point that it could cost them £1 billion a week. They certainly were not told that it could make them worse off. If it is the case, as we have been told, that we will be much better off as a result of leaving and that there will be considerable savings, as the right hon. Lady promised a moment ago, will she promise that those savings will be used to replace the programmes that are currently funded by the EU, such as the crucial £50 million-a-year skills programme that operates in the Black country?

Elizabeth Truss: There will be savings once we leave the European Union, as I have made clear. We want to ensure that those savings are spent in the best interests of everybody in the UK to make our country as successful as it can be.

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): The Chief Secretary will be very aware that her constituents and mine voted overwhelmingly to leave. Does she agree that it feels on the ground as though most people now want to get on with Brexit, but also that they expect the UK to be fair, generous and magnanimous, so long as the financial settlement is contingent on a free trade deal?

Elizabeth Truss: As my hon. Friend points out, the people of Norfolk are fair minded. They want the referendum result to be respected and they want to honour our commitments to the European Union, but they want that to happen in a way that is fair for Britain and British taxpayers and that ensures that we get the best possible deal.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The figures are astronomical. Is it not the case that the British public are already paying the costs of this Government’s approach to Brexit in the form of the £3 billion that the Chancellor announced in the Budget would be spent on Brexit contingencies and the more than £700 million that he has already shelled out? Should people not have been told about that before the referendum?

Elizabeth Truss: It is completely irresponsible of the Opposition to suggest that we should not prepare for all eventualities. It would be disgraceful for the Government not to do that. That would not be the proper action of a responsible Government.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): For the first time in my parliamentary career, I agree with the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner). He is absolutely
right. The 60%-odd of people in Wellingborough who voted to leave would want to know what we were doing with £60 billion. They would want it to be spent on the NHS, social care and defence. They would not want it to be given to the European Union. Does the Chief Secretary agree that such a move would betray the trust of the British people?

Elizabeth Truss: The amounts of money we have read about in the press are speculation. The negotiations are ongoing and we want to secure value for money for the British taxpayer. It is in our interest to secure a long-term economic partnership with the European Union, but we will not pay over money until everything is agreed.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Page 25 of the Government’s brand new industrial strategy document states that the Government are seeking a transition—sorry, an implementation period—of “around two years”. Does the reported deal include provision to pay for an extended deal beyond two years?

Elizabeth Truss: The negotiations are taking place at the moment. We want to secure a reasonable transition deal, but we have to know what the future relationship will be like before we enter into the transition deal. The British public will not accept the can being kicked down the road. They want to know that we are leaving the European Union.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The greatest risk to the new partnership that both the UK and the EU want is that the EU makes such unreasonable demands that no British Government could accept them, on the wrong assumption that this House will never vote for no deal. Does my right hon. Friend therefore agree that all Members who want a good deal, like the hon. Members for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie), for Dudley North (Ian Austin) and for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) and the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), should make it absolutely clear to their constituents that they do not subscribe to the ludicrous idea that any deal is better than no deal?

Elizabeth Truss: I fear that Opposition Members have not made that logical leap yet, but I am sure that my hon. Friend’s question will have helped them reconsider in their own minds.

Mr Gavin Shuker (Luton South) (Lab/Co-op) rose—

Mr Speaker: Extraordinary behaviour! It is good of the hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) to drop in on us.

Mr Shuker: Can the right hon. Lady name any moment in any aspect of the negotiations so far when the Government have gone head to head with the EU27 on an issue on which they have competing ideas about what to do and come out on top? Is this not yet another example of the Government crumbling and facing up to the reality of leaving the EU?

Elizabeth Truss: We are making continuous progress in our negotiations with the EU. Of course, in any negotiation there has to be give and take from both sides. That is exactly what is happening. However, it would be wrong to expose the details of the negotiations at this stage.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): In any divorce, the assets are divided. Given that in today’s money—in real terms—our net contribution to the EU over the lifetime of our membership amounts to £209 billion, will my right hon. Friend make sure that we get our fair share of the EU’s assets when we leave?

Elizabeth Truss: I assure my hon. Friend that that consideration is part of our discussions.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Before making a big decision, it is generally sensible to inquire about the price. Most people will be staggered to learn that the average household in this country will be asked to stump up between £2,000 and £3,000 to pay for this. What plans do the Government have to tell people about the bill they are facing and to ask them whether they think it is a good use of their money?

Elizabeth Truss: The hon. Gentleman needs to look at both sides of the account, because we will not be paying ongoing vast sums into the EU as we are at the moment. He needs to look at the big picture.
Rail Update

1.29 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement about our plans for Britain’s railways. Those railways were privatised in the mid-1990s against a backdrop of what many regarded as terminal decline. The radical Beeching cuts of the 1960s had been followed by further line closures under British Rail, and passenger numbers had been falling steadily since the second world war, yet privatisation sparked a remarkable turnaround in the railway’s fortunes. More than a million and a half more trains are timetabled each year than was the case 20 years ago, and passenger demand has more than doubled. Other countries are now adopting Great Britain’s rail model in their own markets.

To support that growth and reverse decades of underinvestment in the infrastructure, we have embarked on the biggest rail modernisation programme since the Victorian age. In addition to Government funding, billions of pounds of investment from the private sector is helping to renew and expand train fleets, upgrade stations and transform services across the country, and franchises are making an increasing contribution to the public purse. The rail renaissance we are seeing in Great Britain today is the direct result of a successful partnership between public and private sectors.

That partnership has delivered real benefits for passengers for more than 20 years, but that success has created its own challenges. As the number of services has increased, our network has become more and more congested, making the delivery of the punctual, reliable services that passengers expect more challenging. On much of the network, our railway is operating on the edge of what it can cope with. It carries more passengers today than it did in its heyday in the 1920s, on a network that is a fraction of the size. When things go wrong, the impact can be widespread and quick, causing significant frustration for the travelling public.

That is why last year I announced plans to start bringing together the operation of track and train on our railways. I said at the time that it should be a process of evolution and not revolution, and that the exact approach might differ from area to area, but the outcome must be the same: a railway that is predominantly run by a joint local team of people with an absolute commitment to the smooth running of the timetable whether they are planning essential repairs, responding to incidents on the line or communicating with passengers.

Today I am publishing more details about our plans, and an update on what we are doing and the steps we are taking to realise our ambitions. That publication, “Connecting people: a strategic vision for rail”, explains how we will create a new generation of regional rail operations with a relentless focus on the passengers, economies and communities they serve. It represents the biggest change to the delivery of rail services since privatisation.

Although we have already achieved significant structural improvements—with joined-up working between operators and Network Rail, and Network Rail’s own transformation into a series of regional route businesses—the document explains our plans to go much further. Where doing so will deliver real benefits for passengers, many future rail franchises will be run by a joint team, made up of staff from Network Rail and the train company, and headed by a new alliance director. That will make the railway more reliable for passengers by devolving powers to local routes and teams, and ensuring that one team is responsible for running the railways and the related infrastructure.

Today I am issuing the invitation to tender for the next south-eastern franchise. That will, among other things, deliver longer trains, providing space for at least 40,000 additional passengers in the morning rush hour. A simpler, high-frequency “turn up and go” timetable on suburban routes will boost capacity and provide a better service to passengers. As part of the unification of track and train, the day-to-day operations on the south-eastern network will be run by a joint team led by a new alliance director who heads both the train and track operations. On the east midland main line we will also introduce a joint team approach, bringing more benefits to passengers.

Hon. Members will know that the east coast main line has had its challenges in recent times, and I intend to take a different approach on that route. From 2020, the east coast partnership will run the intercity trains and track operations on this route. That partnership between the public and private sector will operate under one management and a single brand, overseen by a single leader. It will take a leading role in planning the future route infrastructure and meeting the challenges that it faces. Bringing the perspective of train operators to decisions on rail infrastructure will help to ensure that passenger needs are better represented in the process. While we run a competition to appoint the east coast partnership members, we are in discussions with the existing east coast franchise operator to ensure that the needs of passengers and taxpayers are met in the short term, and laying the foundations for the reforms I have just outlined.

I want the passenger to be central to train operators’ strategies. On some parts of the network, that will mean that we introduce smaller train companies. I am today launching a consultation on the great western franchise, to seek views on how it can best meet the needs of passengers and communities in the 2020s and beyond. We want to establish whether it should be retained in its current form or divided into smaller parts, with more of a local focus, to deliver best for customers. We will also begin the process of splitting up the Thameslink, southern and great northern franchise in 2021. The two franchises were put together with the intention of helping the implementation of the £6 billion Thameslink upgrade investment programme, which is now near completion.

Despite the improvements in the railway since privatisation, we are still some way from achieving the modern, high-performance, low-cost and customer-focused industry we all want to see. That is why we must continue to reform and invest in the railway, and maximise the contribution that both public and private sectors make to improving services. We will continue to deliver the biggest investment programme in our railways since the steam age, something the Labour party never did when it was in government.

Getting to grips with industry structure will go hand in hand with investment in infrastructure. We need new capacity to cope with growing demand, and new links to support economic growth and housing development.
The great north rail project is transforming journeys across the north, providing faster, more comfortable journeys, new direct services and room for tens of thousands more passengers. Every single train in the north of England will be replaced with as-new or brand new stock—that change was never made when the Labour party was in power.

I intend to invest around £3 billion in upgrading the trans-Pennine route to deliver faster journey times and improved capacity between the great cities of Leeds, York and Manchester. In the south, flagship projects such as Crossrail and Thameslink are coming on stream and providing the capacity to underpin economic growth. Our investment in HS2 will bring north and south closer together, and bring benefits to people across the country. It is a new railway for a new era for rail. It is a bold and ambitious project, but if it were not for ambition and faith in the power of rail to transform the country, we would have no railways at all.

Our vision rejects the mentality of decline that characterised the railway in the second half of the 20th century. To complement record levels of private investment, we recently announced Government funding of up to £34.7 billion for the railway in the years 2019 to 2024, as part of an overall expected spend of £47.9 billion. That will support an overhaul of the network’s ageing assets and other vital work and improvements. Passengers value reliability more than anything, and this commitment will help to deliver it.

We also want to create new connections. We are establishing the East West Rail company to restore the rail link between Oxford and Cambridge that was lost to passengers in 1967 and to provide a major boost to the region. I expect construction work to begin next summer. We will look at other opportunities to restore capacity lost under Beeching and British Rail cuts of the 1960s and 1970s, where such projects would unlock development and growth, offer value for money and unlock the potential for housing.

Large projects and industry reform take time, but passengers want faster improvements in their day-to-day experience travelling on the railway. We do too, and we are doing something about it. We are pushing to have smart ticketing available across almost all the network by the end of 2018. We are improving arrangements for compensation and dispute resolution when things go wrong, including by supporting the establishment of a new passenger ombudsman. We are working with industry to extend the benefits of discounted rail travel, to ensure that all who are aged 16 to 30 can access appropriate concessions. We are investing in new digital technologies and better mobile connectivity. We are committed to improving the accessibility of the network and delivering a modern customer experience that is open to all.

I know that the Labour party does not believe this, but privatisation brought a revolution to our railways—that is why there are twice as many passengers as there were 20 years ago. But now is the time for evolution to build on that success: joining up track and train, expanding the network, modernising the customer experience and opening up the railway to innovation. We have a vision of a revitalised railway that is used to its full potential, delivered by a partnership between the public and private sectors, supporting people, communities and the economy.

We are taking real action to make that vision a reality. I am making copies of the strategic vision available in the Libraries of both Houses, and the great western and south-eastern documents are now on the website of the Department for Transport. I commend this statement to the House.

1.39 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance notice of his statement, the contents of which have already been well trailed in the media.

The Secretary of State and I can be in agreement on rail’s need for investment and new capacity, and I am delighted that he has picked up Labour’s manifesto commitment to reopen branch lines. The problem is that the current system and the structure of the railways do not lend themselves well to the receipt of new investment or the delivery of new capacity. The majority of the recent problems on the railway can be traced back to the planning for control period 5, when the Office of Rail and Road said that Network Rail had to make efficiency savings of 18%. The ORR got this wrong, and the railway has suffered the consequences.

We are where we are on rail, and I am afraid that the Secretary of State has, frankly, now run out of ideas for what to do with the railways, but Labour has a solution, which I will refer to in a moment. The Secretary of State proposes an alliance on the east coast line between track and train. This was done only a few years ago between Stagecoach and Network Rail on the south-west franchise, but Stagecoach pulled out because it was too expensive. Trains on the east coast may be labelled Virgin trains, but they are actually run by Stagecoach.

What makes the Secretary of State think that this alliance with Stagecoach will be any different?

The Secretary of State says he will break up the GTR’s southern and great western franchises. GTR was always going to be broken up at the end of the contract in 2021, so this is not new. His calamitous oversight of the contract only adds to the urgent need to put the whole thing out of its misery for the sake of the passengers.

The Secretary of State says he will reopen lines. He announced the Oxford-Cambridge line a year ago. His new, privately funded line will operate with polluting diesel trains. What about the air quality? Labour supports reopening lines, but, without financial backing, the Secretary of State’s proposals mean nothing in reality. It is all well and good to reverse the Beeching cuts, but what about reversing the Grayling cuts to the great western, the midland mainline and northern railways? The Department’s website hails the reopening of the line “from Blyth to Ashington in County Durham.”

If it is all right with him, I would prefer Blyth and Ashington to stay in Northumberland.

The Secretary of State’s proposals offer nothing for commuters on overcrowded trains who are facing a fare hike of 3.4% in January on top of the 27% rises since 2010. The truth is that the rail system is broken. No amount of rearranging the furniture will change this central fact. I regret that the Secretary of State cannot recognise or admit this.

Today’s announcement is a total smokescreen. We can put all this to one side; the real issue is that the east coast franchise has failed again and the taxpayer will...
have to bail it out. Markets do not lie, and the Stagecoach share price has risen by 12% this morning following the news that the Secretary of State has let it off the hook for hundreds of millions of pounds by ending the current franchise early. He has moved the goalposts to suit Stagecoach. He is tough on everyone except the private sector. Labour took the franchise into public ownership in 2009, and it should have stayed there. Conservative dogma put it back out to the market in 2019, and it should have stayed there. Labour has the vision and the courage to deliver the railway the public deserves. The public want public ownership of the railways, and the next Labour Government will deliver it.

**Chris Grayling:** Fortunately, this country will be waiting a long time for that to happen. What Labour Members really want is to take us back to the days of British Rail, but they have not explained to us how they would pay for all the new trains currently funded by the private sector, or how they would pay for longer trains and better services all around the country. What they do not tell us is that, with a publicly run railway, trains would have to compete for capital costs with hospitals and schools and we would just not get the investment we are currently getting in our railways. Going back to British Rail is simply no solution for the improvements this country desperately needs.

The hon. Gentleman asked a series of specific questions. What is different is what is happening within Network Rail. The devolution within Network Rail—more of a local focus, local decision making, local budgets—is absolutely crucial in making local partnerships possible. We are driving through that change right now, off the back of Nicola Shaw’s report on Network Rail, and it is the right thing to do for the future.

The hon. Gentleman talked about GTR, but I remind the House that the independent Gibb report showed that the GTR problems were substantially down to the actions of the hon. Gentleman’s friends in the unions. Such conduct was unacceptable, and the Labour party’s continuing support for the disruption that unions are causing to passengers on the railways is utterly unacceptable.

The hon. Gentleman asked a question about the Oxford-Cambridge railway line. I did actually give an update on that. Last year, I said we were going to do it. This year, I am saying that we are now ready to start work on that route in the next few months. This Conservative Government are delivering real improvements and real investment on the railways.

The hon. Gentleman also asked about the finance for reopening lines. He may have missed these announcements in the Budget, but I can assure him that there will be £2 billion more for investment in transport in our cities, and there will be £47 billion for investment in the railways over the next five years. We will, indeed, be funding investment in the expansion of the railways, because that is what is needed.

The hon. Gentleman asked a question about electrification. I say again that in a world where we have more flexible technology, I regard it as more of a priority to provide more services and more routes for passengers than to save one minute on the journey time to Sheffield and no minutes on the journey time to Swansea. I am doing what we need to do, which is to deliver better journeys, better journey times and new trains for passengers, which is what they want above all. They are not worried about how the trains are powered, but about whether they will have a nice new train that gets them to the right place, and that is what we are doing.

The hon. Gentleman raised a point about the Blyth-Ashington line. It is one of the projects I am looking at seriously. I think it has real potential to expand the investment we are already making in the Metro in Newcastle upon Tyne, and it is another example of this Government’s commitment to the north-east.

The hon. Gentleman asked what we are doing for commuters. All around the country, we and the private sector, together in partnership, are delivering new trains and longer trains to create more space for people who travel on our crowded railway lines each day.

On the hon. Gentleman’s last point, let us be absolutely clear for the House that as we bring the east coast franchise to a close and move to the new arrangements, no one will get any bail-out at all. It is absolutely clear that Stagecoach will meet in full the commitments it made to the Government as part of this contract, and that is what will happen.

**Iain Stewart** (Milton Keynes South) (Con): I warmly welcome the commitment in the strategy document to the east-west railway line through my constituency and the announcement that its construction will start very soon. Will my right hon. Friend say a little more about when he expects the western section of the line to be up and running, and how this will feed into the National Infrastructure Commission’s recommendations on the Oxford-Milton Keynes-Cambridge corridor?

**Chris Grayling:** My hon. Friend is right that this is an important project. We have been pushing ahead hard with the new special purpose vehicle, which will be set up in the coming weeks. Construction is due to begin next summer, and my goal is to have the first trains running on that route by the end of 2021.

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I, too, thank the Secretary of State for early sight of his statement. Unfortunately, I am having to thank him for early sight of what is a disappointing damp squib. Given the media coverage last night about the possible reversal of the Beeching cuts, I hoped there would be some firm commitments in the statement, but there is nothing other than a throwaway line.

The Beeching cuts were typical of the Tory policy of knowing the price of everything and the value of nothing, and this attitude continues in the Secretary of State’s ideological adherence to privatisation. While he worships the private sector, he needs to remember that there are already four foreign state-owned rail companies operating existing UK franchises. If it is good enough for foreign state-owned companies, it should be good enough for UK state-owned companies to run the franchises. I hope that he supports the Scottish Government’s move to make a public sector bid in Scotland.

The Secretary of State trumpets the turnaround in rail since privatisation, but he does not say that it has been driven by a 90% increase in public sector investment
and a real-terms fare increase of a quarter. That is where the real investment and the turnaround have come from. The Secretary of State’s real masterplan is to create alliances and effectively to sub-divide Network Rail, so I have the following questions. What is the overall governance structure to prevent inter-alliance conflict? Given that he is such a fan of devolution, will he devolve Network Rail to Scotland? Who will fund the new railcard for 26 to 30-year-olds? Will the smart ticket system automatically provide consumers with the cheapest fares? If he is considering reopening lines, will he stop the fire sale of Network Rail assets? He will be well aware that the Scottish Government built the biggest new line in the UK for more than 100 years, on the borders. Will he consider reconnecting Carlisle to the borders by rail? Finally, what are the statement’s funding implications for Scotland, and will he review the existing Barnett formula, which the SNP does not usually argue against. I do not think it can have its cake and eat it.

The Secretary of State’s real masterplan is clearly to divide and conquer, to make a profit and to make the railways safer and more reliable. The Scotland Bill, I accept, will devolve more powers to the Scottish Government, and the SNP has already said that they will undertake a referendum on independence. The Secretary of State’s masterplan will be to split Scotland into different parts to reduce costs and to achieve objectives as soon as possible.

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman has asked a mix of questions; let me take them in turn. On devolution, it remains this Government’s position that we will follow the recommendation, which was part of the broader devolution package, that the Scottish Government should be responsible for franchising but not for the infrastructure. The Scottish National party needs to demonstrate that they can do a decent job in government with the powers it has, rather than ask for more powers.

We are working through the railcard with the industry. The extra revenues may well mean that it will be a self-financing venture, but the Treasury has underwritten it in the Budget process. On the cheapest fare options, I want a system of smart ticketing on our railways so that, for future shorter journeys, we end up with the kind of pay-as-you-go technology that exists in London and other cities, so that people can tap in and tap out as they travel. For longer journeys, ticketing is likely to be based on mobile phones and barcodes. We are working to achieve those objectives as soon as possible.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the sale of assets. There are times when assets are genuinely not needed. They can be sold and the money put back into the railway line—that is the right thing to do—but of course there are assets that we need to protect for the future. Frankly, I wish that some assets had not been disposed of or built over, because that makes it more difficult to reopen some of the routes that I would like to be reopened. We will protect the assets we need.

I applaud the Scottish Government for what they have done with Borders Railway, which is a good project and has made a positive difference to that part of Scotland. I am happy to talk to my Scottish counterparts about how we can do more in the future.

The hon. Gentleman also asked about the funding settlement. As I have said before in this House, the funding settlement for Scotland for rail is based on the Barnett formula, which the SNP does not usually argue against. I do not think it can have its cake and eat it.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I welcome the news that the GTR franchise is to be broken up. It is too big to be managed and has a management incapable of managing it, but given that it has frequently been unable to live up to its performance indicators, why do we have to wait until 2021 to get a competent operator in charge of a manageable franchise area?

Chris Grayling: The real thing we have to achieve is to get through the rest of the Thameslink investment programme. In the coming months, we will also do some significant works on the Brighton main line, spending the £300 million I committed last year to doing the big parts of the project around Balcombe, for example. I would not wish us to destabilise things during that period, but once that is done we will need to get on with making the change.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Alliancing and joint teams can improve dialogue between Network Rail and operators, but that is not a fundamentally different proposition from what has happened before and what is happening now on certain segments of the railway. The underlying factors that contribute to the misalignment between operators and Network Rail—namely, separate performance regimes and financial incentives—simply do not appear to have been addressed. Will the Secretary of State set out the specific steps he intends to take to tackle those fundamental structural shortcomings, so that we finally have a railway that drives co-ordinated performance, cost-reductions and improved reliability?

Chris Grayling: We are already, in the alliance areas and, indeed, elsewhere, moving to aligned performance incentives and aligned key performance indicators. That work is already happening on routes such as great western, where a route board and key performance indicators are being increasingly aligned, so that Network Rail has an incentive to look after passengers in a way that has not always been the case in the past. When it comes to a joint venture on the east coast main line, the KPIs will be the same, because there will be one team doing it. That is the benefit of having somebody in charge, a joint brand, joint planning of budgets and joint KPIs in the same team. That is what is different from the past.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement, this Government’s continued investment in our railways and the success that is possible only because of the partnership with the private sector. He will be aware that concerns have been raised about the break-up of the great western franchise. May I seek his reassurance that any proposals will not leave Devon and Cornwall isolated and that they will be introduced only if they are in the best interests of improving services to and from the south-west and provide value for money for the passenger?

Chris Grayling: First, let me be clear: I do not envisage a Devon and Cornwall-only franchise. That is not part of the plan. I am asking a legitimate question: should we go back to having, in effect, something like Wessex Trains and a franchise with its headquarters in the south-west, that provides regional services in the south-west and that could theoretically even do some of the long-distance services up to Paddington from Penzance? There are pros and cons to that. This is a consultation
to ask the south-west what it thinks. It is no more and no less than that, and I want to get the right answer for the south-west.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I welcome today’s big message that our railways work better when track and train are operated together and the fact that the Secretary of State is now trying to correct the big mistake in the original rail privatisation, when his party separated track and train ownership. May I ask him, on behalf of my constituents in Surbiton, to consider the urgent safety case for a new staircase at platforms 3 and 4 at Surbiton train station, given how dangerously overcrowded they can become during the evening peak?

Chris Grayling: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his support for bringing back together the operation of track and train. If he wants to catch me offline, I would be happy to look at the issue he raises.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement. He mentioned smaller open-access operators, and if so, does he foresee that being available to my hon. and as we move express trains off some of the other lines, we will push the project forward with feasibility work; we will look supportively at those parts of the country that are being asked to take on housing development and see how we can best provide infrastructure for them.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): I echo the concerns expressed by the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) about the idea of breaking up the great western franchise because of the loss of ability to cross-subsidise from the more profit-making parts of the region to the more expensive parts in the far south-west. Exactly how much extra taxpayers’ money is he handing over to Stagecoach as a result of the Government’s botched and ideologically driven privatisation of what was a perfectly good and profitable publicly owned company?

Chris Grayling: The answer is that at this stage we have not yet reached final arrangements. My intention is not to hand over money, but to get the railway line in a preparation stage for the establishment of the east coast partnership. With regard to the great western franchise, this is genuinely a consultation. There are two options: we could continue with the great western franchise as it is, or we could create a second franchise that is focused on the south-west. I have heard both arguments. I am committed to having more accountability and better transport in and around the south-west, which is why we are finally dualling the A303, for example. This is a genuinely open consultation and I want to hear views about it.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I very much welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement. I totally support greater unification of train and track. For my constituents, it is absolutely maddening that when we have problems on the railway—unfortunately, we frequently do on the great eastern main line—Network Rail and the train operator can argue about who is to blame, because our constituents want a single body to point a finger at. Will he confirm that there will be far simpler accountability under these structures, and that when our Greater Anglia franchise expires, we will have the opportunity to look at this sort of regional arrangement?

Chris Grayling: I can absolutely give my hon. Friend that assurance. I think that this approach should spread across the whole rail network, with clearer integration, clearer joint working when something
goes wrong and better joint planning for maintenance works and affected services. That is a really important part of ensuring that the railways work for the future.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Why did the Secretary of State not use this opportunity to say that there would be electrification of the whole of the midland main line, instead of it stopping somewhere in Northampton to suit commuters travelling into London? The other business is that people in my constituency have been asking him for a meeting to try to put to him an alternative to the HS2 spur that will wreck 30 houses in a tiny village in my area. When will he answer their letter? He can tell me now.

Chris Grayling: On the hon. Gentleman’s latter point, my hon. Friend the Rail Minister has already extended an invitation to that meeting, so we will happily talk to the hon. Gentleman’s office this afternoon and fix a date. With regard to the midland main line, we are in the early stages of what is the biggest investment programme in the line since the 1870s. It will mean faster journeys and brand new trains, years earlier than would otherwise have been the case. We can deliver those new trains in 2021-22. We could wait several years more for those new trains. We could spend £1 billion more, but all we would be doing is saving a minute on the journey time to Sheffield. I could be wrong, but I do not think that would be a terribly good use of taxpayers’ money.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): I, too, welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement. What steps are being taken to improve stations, and particularly to improve disabled access at stations such as Rugeley Trent Valley?

Chris Grayling: I absolutely share my hon. Friend’s concern. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Rail Minister has made improving accessibility on the rail network a particular part of his work. We will continue accessibility funding in control period 6, and the opportunity will be particular part of his work. We will continue accessibility funding in control period 6, and the opportunity will be for feasibility studies to assess the costs and benefits of securing track in decades past? Will money be available for feasibility studies to assess the costs and benefits of opening up, for economic regeneration purposes, former branch lines that were closed in the ’60s?

Chris Grayling: In the new year we will publish a new process for evaluating new projects and moving them into development. I will happily talk with my hon. Friend about how that process will work and how he can have his project on the Isle of Wight considered.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): I have written to the Secretary of State about Kirkstall Forge railway station in my constituency. It opened just over a year ago, but only one train stops there an hour. If we are going to open new railway stations, we must have trains stopping at them. Will the Secretary of State agree to meet with Arriva Rail North and myself to talk about the frequency of services at Kirkstall Forge, so that we can get maximum benefit out of this housing and business development?

Chris Grayling: I am happy to have that conversation. When a new station opens, it is not unusual for it to start with an hourly service while the passenger ridership builds. Of course, as demand grows, services tend to grow. I am just delighted that we are able to invest in better station facilities in the hon. Lady’s constituency, which I am sure she will agree were long overdue.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the overall thrust of this plan. As the Secretary of State will know, it is probably no coincidence that the current GWR franchise covers roughly the same area that the railway company did back in the 1930s, so it is interesting to note the proposal to split. Can he reassure me that in any consideration of this the top priority will be services to passengers, particularly maintaining direct links between London Paddington and Paignton?

Chris Grayling: I can absolutely assure my hon. Friend that we want to see those services protected. Again, this is a genuine consultation. I do not have a pre-set view; I am relaxed and I want to listen to those people who represent the south-west and ask, “What works best for the constituents you represent?” We will listen and respond accordingly. There is certainly no prejudged view in the Department about what the right way forward is; we are simply asking the question.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The Secretary of State’s U-turn on his promise to electrify the line from Cardiff to Swansea included all the safety improvements that were part of that work, including the plan to close the level closing in Pencoed in my constituency. Can he set out, as part of his grand vision for the railways, how he will now invest in closing dangerous level crossings? While he is at it, will he explain how he will keep the promise on highway improvements in the same town, which were linked to rail electrification?

Chris Grayling: Safety remains fundamentally important for Network Rail. We are fortunate enough to have the safest rail network in Europe. Network Rail has a rolling programme to replace dangerous level crossings,
which will continue in all circumstances. I think that the Welsh Labour Government are rapidly reaching the same conclusion that we are reaching, because the versatility of bi-mode trains means that we do not always have to erect overhead cables. The hon. Gentleman talks about us making the wrong decisions, but I caution him to wait and see what the Welsh Government decide to do, because he might find that the Labour party agrees with us on the best way forward.

**Maria Caulfield** (Lewes) (Con): I welcome the announcement that the southern and Thameslink franchise will be broken up—it cannot come soon enough for my constituents. Can I ask specifically about the line reopening, because we have the Lewes to Uckfield line in my constituency, with the BML2 scheme, which could be opened very easily, improving connectivity and putting towns such as Seaford and Newhaven on a main line for the first time? We have private investors willing to put up over £15 million to fund that. Will the Secretary of State use that scheme as one of the first to illustrate what can really be done?

**Chris Grayling**: My hon. Friend knows that I have met the investors who are interested in pursuing that project, and I have said that I am very open to doing so. I am waiting with interest for them to come back with their project, and I have said that I am very open to doing so.

**Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): There was little mention of Wales in the Secretary of State’s letter to hon. Members on the great western consultation, yet key services run through my constituency. I am hoping for a significant increase in services from Cardiff to Newport and Bristol.

**Chris Grayling**: Of course, much of the responsibility for local services in the hon. Lady’s constituency lies with the Welsh Government, and I am looking forward to seeing the outcome of their work in delivering new trains and better services as part of the new franchise. As for what we are doing in her constituency, there is the electrification programme into Paddington and the investment in the intercity express trains, which are providing faster and better journeys, but I am expecting and hoping for a significant increase in services, including a more frequent and faster service.

**Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. The east Suffolk line, which runs from Lowestoft to Ipswich, dodged the Beeching bullet and is now going from strength to strength, with a regular hourly service. Will he give an assurance that his improvements will provide the framework for further improvements, including a more frequent and faster service?

**Chris Grayling**: One of the things I am pleased we are doing in partnership with the private sector is the complete transformation of the train fleet across East Anglia. Every single train will be replaced with brand-new trains that have more capacity for passengers. As demand grows, we will have to look again at routes such as my hon. Friend’s to see whether there is a need for more services. In the immediate future, however, I hope that his constituents will be delighted to see the brand-new trains arriving to deliver a better journey for them.

**Paul Flynn** (Newport West) (Lab): I am struck by the contrast between, on the one hand, the strength and wisdom of the best Select Committee report of my time in Parliament, the unanimous 1993 report by a Tory-dominated Committee chaired by the Secretary of State’s late colleague, Robert Adley, which forecast accurately all the problems that privatisation would bring, and, on the other hand, today’s statement, which seems nothing more than a piece of vacuous window dressing designed to distract us from the Government’s collapsing policies on Brexit.

**Chris Grayling**: There is nothing like trying to shoehorn every issue into one question, is there? The simple reality is that back in the 1990s our railways were in a state of decline—routes and stations were being closed, and there was even a plan to turn Marylebone station into a coach station. That was the reality of the days of British Rail. In the past 20 years, we have seen new trains, new routes and double the number of passengers. The problems today are the problems of success, not failure. That is why the approach in today’s statement is the right one. It is not designed to tear everything up and start again; it is designed to evolve the railways so that they are better placed to deal with the challenges that result from success.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): The last Labour Government halved the mainline northbound service from Kettering from a half-hourly service to an hourly service, but since then the significance of Kettering on the railway network has increased: there are now more passengers; it is effectively the hub between the commuter service to Corby and the main line northwards; and it is now to be the interface between the electrified part of the line and the diesel-operated part of the line. Will my right hon. Friend agree that Kettering would therefore be the ideal base for the new train and track operating team?

**Chris Grayling**: Kettering is a fine town and a well represented constituency, and I can absolutely understand the case that my hon. Friend and Kettering would make for its hosting the operating team. He is absolutely right that it is at the heart of the midland main line. It might have some competition from Derby and others, but he makes a strong case.

**David Hanson** (Delyn) (Lab): The Chancellor of the Exchequer mentioned in the Budget last week the north Wales growth deal, which includes a proposal for a metro linking north Wales and the north-west of England much more effectively. Has the Secretary of State received a cheque from the Chancellor?

**Chris Grayling**: Actually, it was my suggestion that we look at the project. I have listened to the right hon. Gentleman and understood the argument, and the Chancellor has provided development funding so that we can take that work forward.
Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): Building alliances and closer working between Network Rail and train operating companies into franchises is a welcome move, but I would be grateful if my right hon. Friend could advise us on how Network Rail will ultimately be held accountable for meeting the terms of future franchises or contracts, just as the train operating companies currently are. Also, will that mean that infrastructure improvements will now be considered as part of the franchising process?

Chris Grayling: On the latter point, they can be now—there is nothing to prevent train companies from coming forward with small-scale infrastructure proposals. I would be happy to see the private sector come forward with plans, for example, to introduce digital signalling on routes, but we will not move the infrastructure itself out of public ownership. The accountability comes from the performance measures we put in place for Network Rail and the people who lead it, but I think that devolution to individual routes will mean better services, a more local focus and more out-of-the-box thinking, which Network Rail needs to do if it is to deliver best value for everyone involved.

Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): My constituents will be listening with avid interest, because prior to the general election, the Transport Secretary visited my constituency and said that the reinstatement of the Burscough curves between Burscough, Preston and Ormskirk would be a “quick win” to help improve rail services in the north. When will we get this “quick win”?
When will funding for that project, for electrification in the area and for the Skelmersdale railway station be forthcoming? My constituents look forward to him keeping his promise.

Chris Grayling: Of course, the people of West Lancashire will be getting the benefit of the investment programme in the line from Manchester to Blackpool. It is a huge investment in improving the services on that route. That, right now, is our priority. After that, I hope we will move forward with other projects that can make a difference to passengers in Lancashire and elsewhere in the north-west.

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement and the focus on passengers in particular. He will know that 30% of passenger improvements on Abellio Greater Anglia were due to the new fleet, but that 60% were due to the track. The Oxford-Cambridge line does not end at Cambridge, but goes through to Felixstowe and carries most of the freight for this country, so may I urge him to make Horley junction and Ely junction key priorities in order to deliver better services for both passengers and the freight industry?

Chris Grayling: I certainly give my hon. Friend that assurance and reiterate the commitment I have given to people in East Anglia that in control period 6 the work on Ely junction will free up both freight and passenger access through that important junction and open up all kinds of opportunities across East Anglia. That will be an early priority for us.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): My constituents are used to travelling on trains where there is a link between those who run the track and those who run the rolling stock, but that body is the publicly run Transport for London, and the Secretary of State refuses to allow it to have anything to do with the south-eastern franchise based on the fact that we have a Labour Mayor. My constituents deserve better than his petty political grievances. Will he allow TfL to demonstrate that it is capable of running the franchise more efficiently than the private sector has done hitherto?

Chris Grayling: I would make two points. First, Transport for London does not run the track and the trains. The trains are run as part of a franchise by Arriva. Secondly, I can assure the hon. Gentleman that what we have outlined today—more services and longer trains on the south-eastern line—is a lot better than what TfL offered in its business plan. My concern is to deliver a better service for his constituents rather than unnecessary political shuffling.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): What talks has the Secretary of State had with the Northern Powerhouse Minister about the upgrading of the trans-Pennine route, and will he consider linking up the great cities of Liverpool and Newcastle, as well as Leeds, York and Manchester?

Chris Grayling: Absolutely. The key point about the trans-Pennine upgrade is that we have already electrified it from Manchester to Liverpool. That bit of the project has been done. The next bit is from Manchester to Leeds to York. I have said that that will be a £3 million programme. It is the next big rail investment project. I am expecting Network Rail’s detailed proposals shortly. It will be the next big project we go ahead with and will make a big difference to the north.

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): I warmly welcome the announcement today of a consultation on the great western franchise and the improvements it will bring to passenger services in Devon and beyond, but may I seek my right hon. Friend’s reassurance that there will be a focus in that process on the one rail service that serves my constituency—that between Exeter and Barnstaple? It is not just a quaint tourist line used in August; it is a vital part of north Devon’s economic infrastructure.

Chris Grayling: It certainly is, and I do not want that service to be diminished in any way. My hon. Friend will be interested to know that one of the routes on which we intend to start passenger services again—and we are actively engaged in that work—is the line from Okehampton to Exeter. I think that has the potential to ease congestion at Exeter, and to provide a better commuter route.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State tell us why he is not electrifying the midland main line even though every single business organisation, Member of Parliament and local council is telling him that that is what he should do? Why is he ignoring the wishes of local people and local representatives, saying that he knows best, and simply offering them a “joint team approach”, whatever that is?
Chris Grayling: The answer to that is very simple. Over the next four years, we will deliver the biggest upgrades to the midland main line since the 1870s. We are straightening tracks to improve line speeds, and resignalling in places such as Derby. The programme will deliver faster journey times—it will take 15 to 20 minutes off the journey to Sheffield—and we will deliver brand-new trains on that route in the early 2020s. I could then go further and electrify the route all the way to Sheffield, but all that I would be doing is delaying the arrival of new trains and saving one minute on the journey time to Sheffield, at a cost of £1 billion. I think that we should deliver what passengers want—better journeys, faster journeys and new trains—more quickly, and that is what we are going to do.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): On my own behalf and that of my neighbour and right hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd), I thank the Secretary of State—who has visited our area and seen the potential there—for the proposals on page 31 of the south-eastern rail franchise stakeholder briefing document, which will deliver faster trains from Hastings with fewer station stops, and, crucially, require any bidder for the franchise to pay attention to the potential for high-speed rail to be extended to Hastings, Rye and Bexhill. Does he agree that that will unlock regeneration in our constituencies?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We get caught up in the biggest projects, but sometimes the smaller ones—even a bit of track realignment in places—can make the biggest difference. I hope to do big things, such as the trans-Pennine upgrade, but also smaller things at, for instance, Ashford, where we are trying to improve the situation for passengers.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): As the Secretary of State will know, the Cumbria coastline and the Furness line are giving a dire performance at the moment. It is disappointing that Cumbria was not mentioned in the strategy. Will he ask the Rail Minister, the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), to meet us to discuss what can be done about the 50-year-old locomotives that are breaking down and annoying residents, the terrible state of the rolling stock, and the awful standard of reliability? There is an urgent need to fix all that, otherwise there will be significant damage to the economy.

Chris Grayling: I am delighted to be able to remind the hon. Gentleman that we are scrapping all those trains on that route and getting new ones. We are also introducing better services, including Sunday services. All that is being rolled out now. We have a partnership with the Labour leaderships in the councils of the north and Transport for the North, and we have been working side by side to shape the new franchise and the replacements for the rail fleets, for which the Government are paying. Those trains are on order, and the first new trains are now entering service in the northern networks and the trans-Pennine network. Every single train in the north of England on every single route is being replaced—either completely refurbished as new, or scrapped. The old Pacer trains on the Cumbrian coastline, which should have been scrapped years ago and were not under Labour, are being scrapped by us now.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): I noted, both in the rail strategy—which I welcome—and in the Secretary of State’s reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), a reference to improvement works at Ely North junction. Can the Secretary of State assure me that when those works—which will benefit the entire region and take freight off the road—are completed, my constituents in Queen Adelaide will not be disadvantaged?

Chris Grayling: Our aim is always to minimise the impact of improvement works as they are happening, and also their consequences. I assure my hon. Friend that we will work with her and her constituents to ensure that this is a beneficial investment for her part of the world, and that where it has any impacts, we will minimise them as far as is possible.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I noted what the Secretary of State said about compensation for passengers when things go wrong. He is aware, I know, of the appalling service that Northern Rail is currently providing in my constituency. Could a more flexible compensation system be introduced? Delay Repay does not capture the full experience that my constituents are having.

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend the Rail Minister and I are working to create a passenger ombudsman, because we recognise that there are circumstances in which a conventional repayment system does not reflect the problems that someone has experienced, and that will happen shortly.

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for the statement, and particularly for what he said about the south-eastern franchise. It is necessary because of the significant amount of house building that will take place in north Kent over the next 20 years, and because there will be extra capacity and more seats for my constituents, who have been complaining about the service for a long time. Are there any further plans to increase capacity on the wonderful High Speed 1 network? My constituents who want to use that service often complain about the lack of seats and the inadequate number of trains available.

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The high-speed trains to St Pancras are pretty full at peak times. We have talked to the bidders about that, and I know that they are thinking about how best to tackle the capacity challenge. We will see what happens when the bids come through, but I know that the issue is on everyone’s radar.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): In 2014, the last Tory Prime Minister described electrification of the great western main line across south Wales as “transformational for communities” and “huge”. Given that the Government have now cancelled electrification from Cardiff to Swansea, why should my constituents, or anyone else, believe Tory promises on rail again?

Chris Grayling: The answer is that we are delivering much faster connections to south Wales. The huge investment in the great western main line, not just in electrification but in improving the track and the signalling,
[Chris Grayling]

will make a transformational difference to the south Wales economy. We are spending money to ensure that the new intercity express trains can go west of Swansea, and brand-new intercity express trains are already travelling from Swansea and delivering better conditions for passengers. If we erect overhead cables between Cardiff and Swansea now, it will cost several hundred million pounds and deliver no extra benefits to passengers—not even a minute off the journey time—which is why that does not make any sense.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I was disappointed that the Secretary of State did not attend the debate on transport in the north on 6 November. He has talked about his priorities for transforming services in this country. Which does he think will happen first, Crossrail for the north between Liverpool and Hull or Crossrail mark 2 for London, between Surrey and Hertfordshire?

Chris Grayling: Those two projects will happen in lockstep. They are both important, they are both going to happen, and we are going to steer them in parallel.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The journey from Paddington to Cardiff is regularly a version of hell. Trains are frequently cancelled, and then everyone has to pile on to the next train, often an hour later. My constituents tell me that it is often announced that a train will not set off for another 20 minutes because it is too overloaded to be safe. At the weekends, instead of putting on extra trains after international matches, the company puts on fewer trains, which means that hundreds of people are standing for four hours. That is simply unfair and wrong. When will the Secretary of State put it right?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman will be delighted to see the arrival of the new Hitachi intercity express trains, which will have more seats and more capacity. They will replace trains that are well out of date, and will provide a faster, better service for passengers.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for helping to secure extra money for north Wales in the Budget, but that was for the development of a business case for the Wrexham-Bidston line, which is merely a taster. Will he please help to deliver the main course of the north Wales growth deal, which will unlock growth in one of the most effective and forward-looking areas of the national economy?

Chris Grayling: I know that the hon. Gentleman is after not just the hors d’oeuvre but a second course. That second course will probably be the Crewe hub, on which we are working carefully at the moment, but I thought that he at least deserved an appetiser. I buy the argument that the present situation as trains head north from Wrexham is not right, and I am therefore delighted that the Chancellor agreed to fund the development work for that scheme.

Graeme Morris (Easington) (Lab): I give the Transport Secretary credit for acknowledging the failure on at least two occasions of the private franchise running the east coast main line. My recollection is that when it was operated by the UK state-owned Directly Operated Railways it generated more than £100 million in profit for the Treasury, which could be used for vital public services. What assessment has he made of the additional costs of the private-public sector partnership, and would it not be better to use the profits to extend the Tyne and Wear Metro into Easington rather than swelling the coffers of privately operated train companies, often German, Dutch and Spanish Government-owned?

Chris Grayling: There is a curious conundrum in this. We hear so much uncertainty from Labour about what they think about Brexit: they seem to want to stay in the single market and continue to operate in the traditional way, but they do not want to work with train companies from other countries. That is a bit illogical.

I am delighted that we as a Government are finally investing—in a way that the hon. Gentleman's party did not—in rail in the north-east. The investment in trains on the Metro and the plans to extend it are the right things to do to help his constituency and the economy of the north-east, and I am very proud to be able to deliver them. It is also worth saying that the private sector franchise on the east coast main line has been contributing more to the Treasury than the public sector one did.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I wrote to the Secretary of State on 23 October and eagerly await his response. My constituents are, frankly, fed up with chronically overcrowded and unreliable trains and substandard services. What action is being taken to monitor the performance delivered by the train operating companies?

Chris Grayling: The good thing from the hon. Lady’s point of view is that, although she is right that her constituency has old, overcrowded trains that are not long enough, we are replacing them with new longer trains. That will make a transformational difference to the travelling experience of her constituents and others right across the north.

Mr Gavin Shuker (Luton South) (Lab/Co-op): I have read the Secretary of State’s document published today and was perplexed that there is no reference to mutual operators. I can only assume that that is an oversight, given that they provide democratic control, work within the existing framework he has laid out in this document, and reinvest their profits for the value of all passengers. Given that, will he or his Rail Minister commit to a short meeting to talk about the barriers faced by mutual operators?

Chris Grayling: I can only say that I will be very happy to see an employee-owned bid come forward. There is no barrier to that happening at all. I will be very happy to see a partnership between employees and investors come forward, and if there are artificial barriers to that happening, I am happy to see whether we can remove them.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Every line that could be reopened, as outlined in the Secretary of State’s strategic rail vision, appears to be in England. The Aberystwyth to Carmarthen line was closed under the Beeching cuts, and reopening it not only enjoys considerable support
in Ceredigion but could serve to significantly boost the economy of west Wales. Will the Secretary of State agree to meet me and the campaign group to discuss ways of adding that line to his map of lines that could be reopened?

Chris Grayling: We have a clear responsibility for Welsh infrastructure, and I want it to improve in a way that provides extra services for passengers and better routes, hence the Wrexham to Bidston investment that I expect us to make. The Rail Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys, will be very happy to talk to the hon. Gentleman and the campaign group about that route; I am aware of it, and was, in fact, talking about it the other day to people in Wales. I am well aware that people want that project to be opened, but I should also make it clear that, as we invest in reopening routes, they have to either unlock economic opportunity or housing opportunity or break up a real point of congestion. We cannot simply recreate old routes that no longer have a commercial purpose.

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State will be aware from my communications of the importance of rail connectivity in my constituency of Leigh, which is the fifth largest town in the country without a railway station. Following the publication of his report today, the industrial strategy and the social mobility reports, which all highlight the importance of connectivity for social and economic purposes, will he confirm that my constituency will be, or has been, considered for the reversal of the Beeching cuts?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Lady makes a good point, and of course I want significant towns to be well served by the railways. I know she is meeting my hon. Friend the Rail Minister a little later this afternoon, and we will listen very carefully to what she says.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): My constituency is on the brink of daily gridlock due to the welcome but significant developments in housing and travel-to-work routes that are not fit for purpose, so I welcome the reference to the Portishead line and the Henbury line in this strategy, but the solution is the Henbury loop line. Will the Secretary of State commit in his conversations with the Conservative metro Mayor for the west of England to reiterating the advice given by his Department to my predecessor—that an independent business case study should be funded for delivery of the Henbury loop line?

Chris Grayling: I spoke to the metro Mayor this morning about this and the investments we need, and also about North Filton railway station. He clearly has a strong agenda to take forward investment in the suburban service around Bristol. I have also been to the port and looked at the point on the putative Henbury loop that would be the issue. We need to resolve that, and I absolutely understand the need to get those services working well.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): The prize for patience and perseverance goes to Luke Pollard.


Fragmentation of the great western franchise risks locking in a poor deal for rail for the far south-west, so will the Secretary of State take this opportunity to match the commitment given by the shadow Secretary of State for Transport to fund the peninsula rail taskforce recommendations for faster journeys and a more resilient railway, and to ensure that we can unlock the investment we need for Plymouth, Devon and Cornwall?

Chris Grayling: I reiterate my point that this is a consultation, and I want views from all sides. We will make a change only if it is the right thing to do. We are not going to create a little fringe franchise just for Devon and Cornwall, cutting them off. If we make a change, it will be to have much more of a south-western franchise serving the region, providing good links locally.

The peninsula rail taskforce’s top recommendation was that we need to deal with the issue of the cliffs at Dawlish. The work on developing the solution to that is happening now, and that is critical to making sure that the route is resilient. That is my No. 1 rail priority for the south-west, and I give an absolute guarantee to the House that, as long as I am Transport Secretary and beyond, my party is committed to delivering a solution to prevent the real risk that those cliffs represent.
Yemen

Application for emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)

2.37 pm

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): I seek leave to propose that the House should debate a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration, namely Britain’s engagement with Saudi Arabia and Yemen.

Today we are witnessing an almighty catastrophe of Biblical proportions unfolding in Yemen, in which Britain is dangerously complicit. Britain is respected throughout the world for bringing hope and relief to those caught up in humanitarian misery, but today in Yemen, which I visited earlier this year, we are in danger of earning a reputation for precisely the reverse, for the UK is part of the coalition that is imposing a blockade by land, sea and air on 27 million Yemenis. In recent weeks, fuel prices have risen by up to 160%, and rice and basic foods by nearly 70%. Fuel for generators, which are essential for hospitals and water-pumping stations, will run out shortly.

Yesterday’s announcement by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, while arguably slowing the trajectory, will not in any way curtail this escalating disaster. United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres said last week that, unless the blockade is lifted, famine throughout Yemen is a very real threat, including on the southern borders of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Moreover, wilfully impeding humanitarian access may constitute a violation of international humanitarian law.

It is increasingly clear that this blockade imposed on Yemen constitutes the collective and illegal punishment of an entire population. If you grant this debate, Madam Deputy Speaker, I believe that the House will see clearly that current policy will result in a huge strategic failure both for Saudi Arabia and, by extension, for the UK. It is important that the voice of this House is heard urgently, along with the Prime Minister’s on her current visit to the Gulf.

Above all, it is a moral failure that confronts us. Famine is a phenomenon that we were close to eradicating from the human condition. The last 20 years has seen only two famines throughout the world. When I was responsible in 2011 for co-ordinating the UK’s efforts to address one of those famines, in Somalia, I saw for myself emaciated children and starving mothers. Today in Yemen we are witnessing a totally preventable mass humanitarian catastrophe, the likes of which we have not seen in decades.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): The right hon. Gentleman asks leave to propose a debate on a specific and important matter which should have urgent consideration, namely the current situation in Yemen. On behalf of Mr Speaker, I have listened carefully to the application from the right hon. Gentleman. Mr Speaker is satisfied that the matter raised is proper to be discussed under Standing Order No. 24. Has the right hon. Gentleman the leave of the House?

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker: The motion is clearly—[Interruption] Order. I reassure Members that I do not have to count them. No one indicated dissent and the proposal is clearly supported as required by the Standing Order.

Application agreed to.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The debate will be held tomorrow, Thursday 30 November, as the first item of public business. It will last for up to three hours and will arise on a motion that this House has considered the specific matter set out in the right hon. Gentleman’s application, namely that this House has considered the current situation in Yemen.
Food Insecurity

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

2.41 pm

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): I beg to move.

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require the Government to monitor and report on food insecurity; to make provision for official statistics on food insecurity; and for connected purposes.

People are going hungry, and with each passing day of this terrible excuse for a Government, more and more are falling into poverty with little chance of escape. There are no second chances in Britain today. Food poverty is a clear consequence of this Government’s ideological assault on the social safety net and the people who rely on it, and of their ongoing inaction on poverty pay.

Each time hunger is raised in this Chamber, I have heard Secretaries of State and Ministers denigrate statistics from charities, food banks and colleagues, claiming that the figures are not robust enough, or that the information is not reliable enough to inform Government policy. Denying the accuracy of the data or simply turning a blind eye allows Conservative Members to pretend that the problem does not exist.

Today, with this Bill, I am giving the Government an opportunity to rectify this data gap and to robustly measure the levels of hunger in the UK, because we all know that what gets measured gets done. The problem of food insecurity in the UK is increasing. While the devolved Administrations in Scotland and Northern Ireland are taking steps to implement measurement, this Government doggedly persist in refusing calls from the Food Foundation, Sustain, Oxfam, myself and a host of others to routinely and robustly measure levels of food insecurity. United Nations estimates from 2014 suggest that as many as 8 million households in the UK are food insecure. That is 8 million households who cannot afford to eat, or who are worrying about where their next meal will come from. But that estimate is based on a small survey of around 1,000 people, which is not nearly good enough to properly inform policy.

In 2016, when the Food Standards Agency surveyed households about food insecurity as part of the “Food and You” survey, it found that 21% of households in England, Wales and Northern Ireland were moderately to severely food insecure. That one-off measurement gives a snapshot of the problem, but does not allow for an analysis of long-term trends or the ability to track the impact of policy changes.

This month, the Office for National Statistics released data showing that due to the drop in the value of sterling as a result of Brexit uncertainties, food inflation had risen more than 4% over the past year. We need up-to-date information on the impact that that is having on UK families’ ability to afford enough healthy food, because being food insecure has lasting health impacts. We already know that the UK is facing a double burden of food insecurity and obesity, which is no surprise given the types of meals that a food insecure family can afford. More worryingly, in the last financial year, a count of hospital admissions in England revealed that nearly 8,000 adults and more than 300 children were admitted as a result of malnutrition. Those figures should shame any Government, but for a Government in one of the richest countries in the world, they are simply unforgivable.

The latest data provided by the Trussell Trust shows that just over 1 million three-day emergency food supplies were given to people in crisis over the past year; but this is just the tip of the iceberg, as the Trussell Trust collects data only from its own food banks. Independent research has found that there are at least 1,000 food banks in operation. There are also the “hidden hungry”, who will not go to a food bank and rely on the kindness of their friends, family and neighbours, or, worse still, go hungry so as not to face the shame of having to ask for food.

The desperate state of this problem is something that I and my colleagues see every day in our constituencies. I recall a woman who called my constituency office in desperate need of help after having problems with her benefits. She had no money for gas or electricity, and no food to feed herself and her four children under the age of 10. She was alone and unable to afford to get to the nearest food bank. In the end, our local volunteers in Shields managed to get food to her. The fact that faith groups and charities have had to fill a gap left by the Government reveals a massive dereliction of duty by the Government. As a result, food banks are now a permanent part of our welfare state.

According to United Nations data on food insecurity in the UK, as many as 17 times the number of people using Trussell Trust food banks are food insecure. Also, food bank use is an indication of last resort, when families are at imminent risk of going hungry. Recurring or moderate food insecurity is not captured by measuring food bank use. We also know that measuring the proportion of income spent on food is not an adequate measure of food insecurity. New evidence from Canada shows that food insecure households will continue to spend the same proportion of their income on food when their income falls, and that they then experience increasingly severe food insecurity. In addition, these measures do not inform us about food affordability, the socio-emotional issues faced by people who are food insecure, the use of survival strategies, or people’s inability to meet needs. These issues can be captured only by measuring a household’s experience of food insecurity.

Capturing and measuring the experience of food insecurity is easier than we all think. Many survey tools have been validated and are being used in countries around the world. The United States Department of Agriculture’s food insecurity module includes questions that assess both household and child food insecurity. The method involves asking a series of questions about people’s experiences of accessing a sufficient quality and quantity of food. The results rank a household’s food insecurity on a scale from mild to severe. The Bill proposes that such questions should be inserted into representative UK-wide household surveys that the Government already conduct.

What I propose is very simple. Adding the food insecurity module to an existing survey, such as the living costs and foods survey, could be cost-neutral if some less important questions were removed. For example, the survey currently asks households about the food they grow at home. We need new questions for new times.

This straightforward Bill proposes introducing an existing measure into an existing survey, which could be done cost neutrally. As we negotiate new trading
arrangements with Europe and beyond, as global populations rise, as conflicts spread and as more extreme weather affects food supplies globally and domestically, food security will become an even more important issue. In order to meet the challenges of the future and the urgency now, the need to measure food insecurity here in the UK is more important than ever.

As I present this Bill, there will be a mother in my constituency wondering how she is going to feed herself and her toddler today. There will be schoolchildren struggling to focus because their stomachs are rumbling, parents who have yet again skipped breakfast to ensure that their children did not have to, families searching their cupboards for what is left, and elderly people who are unable to access fresh food. But that is not just happening in my constituency; the situation is the same in constituencies and homes right across the UK. As I have outlined, implementing the measurement is not an insurmountable or costly challenge, and the Government owe it to every man, woman and child who woke up hungry this morning and will go to bed hungry tonight, in one of the richest countries in the world, to do so. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck, Frank Field, Kate Green, Jim Shannon, Liam Byrne, Kerry McCarthy, Stephen Timms, Dan Jarvis, Alison Thewliss, Layla Moran, Mr Jim Cunningham and Grahame Morris present the Bill.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 2 February 2018, and to be printed (Bill 136).
The Government should be utterly ashamed of trying to argue that they have mitigated things, which demonstrates that some Conservative Members simply do not get what is going on.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The tragedy is that it falls to us to speak for the individuals who have suffered. I have a constituent in Dolgellau who was born 24 hours too late and now has to work for an extra two years and three months. The change has led to individual tragedies.

Ian Blackford: I am grateful for that intervention; I cannot really add much to what the hon. Lady says, because she demonstrates the ridiculous nature of the situation and why the Government must listen.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con) rose—

Ian Blackford: I will take one more intervention, but then I must make some progress.

Tim Loughton: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, who knows that I support this cause. Although I cannot be here for the rest of the debate due to its late start, if there is a vote, I will certainly support this innocuous motion. The measures taken in 2011 actually benefited men just as much as women, but this is very much a women-focused injustice. Some 33% of men approaching retirement expect to rely on just a state pension, but the percentage for women is as much as 53%, which is why this issue is so important to them and to all of us.

Ian Blackford: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that important intervention. He has been resolute on this matter over the past couple of years, and I know that the women are grateful for his support; I hope that he will be back for the vote later on. I am glad that he referred to the motion in front of us, because we had a choice of all sorts of things to lay before the House today, but the motion is laid in such a way—simply calling on the Government to put mitigation in place—that all the Members of Parliament who have shown support for the WASPI women can support it. Now is our only chance to show that we can stand up and do something for those women.

Several hon. Members rose—

Ian Blackford: I know that many Members want to speak, so I will make some progress and let people in later.

This is about women who have paid national insurance in anticipation of receiving a pension and have been hit with the bombshell that their pension was being deferred—in some cases by up to six years—with only 15 months’ written notice. Members should dwell on that. They were looking forward to retirement, but they received a letter telling them that they were going to get as little as 15 months’ notice of an increase in their pension age. Can anybody on the Government Benches defend that? Will anybody stand up and tell the House and the public that giving someone 15 months’ written notice of an increase in their pension age is acceptable? Is anyone prepared to do that? If so, I will happily give way.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con) rose—

Hon. Members: Ah!

James Cartlidge: We recognise people’s concerns about the notice, but to rectify the situation requires public funds. In a previous debate, the right hon. Gentleman said that his party’s position was to pay for that from the surplus in the national insurance fund. Is that still his party’s policy?

Ian Blackford: Well, there we are. Given the opportunity to defend the indefensible, we again get spin. Let me make things absolutely crystal clear. The national insurance fund is sitting at a surplus in the region of £30 billion, and that surplus has been generated by the women who have paid national insurance. All that we have asked for is that the women be given what they are entitled to receive. A pension should be seen as a right, but the Government have changed the terms and conditions of that right without consulting those who have paid in for a pension. As many of the campaigners have said, “We paid in, you pay out.”

This campaign is at the heart of SNP policy. We have long fought for the Government to rectify the shambles and give the WASPI women the pensions they rightfully deserve. I speak on behalf of SNP Members when I say that we will never rest until justice is delivered for the women affected. The Government have failed time and time again to address the injustices of a lack of notice for the acceleration of the state pension age. There is an opportunity today for the Government to admit that effective notice was not given of an increase in pensionable age. The process of increasing pensionable age must be slowed down.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman is speaking with his customary passion on this issue, which he says is at the heart of Scottish National party thinking. I am not an expert on devolved powers, but my understanding from reading the legislation is that the Scottish Government have the powers to rectify this issue if they so wish. He chastises the Treasury Bench for a lack of action, but we have seen no action from Holyrood that could give a lead to the Government.

Ian Blackford: There we have it. Does anybody here think the Scottish Government have power to introduce pensions? [Hon. Members: “No!”] I will tell the House why: it is because we do not have the powers. It is about time that Conservative Members stopped creating the impression that we have that power.

Let me be absolutely crystal clear. Power over pensions is reserved to Westminster. There is a bit of a clue, because pensions are paid out of national insurance. I would love the Scottish Government to have control over national insurance. Let me make it clear that if we had control over pensions in Scotland, we would make sure that the WASPI women in Scotland got what is rightfully theirs.

Simon Hoare: The Scotland Act 2016 does not preclude the right hon. Gentleman—

Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): Pensions are reserved.

Simon Hoare: I agree entirely that pensions are reserved, but discretionary payments could be made by the Scottish Government. Why have they not done so?
Ian Blackford: There is a very simple answer. I have respect for the hon. Gentleman, as he knows, and he should go back and read the 2016 Act, because it is crystal clear that we cannot introduce new benefits, nor can we introduce payments based on age. The fundamental point that needs to be made is that we are talking about the state pension in the United Kingdom, which is a reserved matter. It ill behoves any Conservative Member to try to create the impression that the people of Scotland and elsewhere have powers that we do not have. If Conservative Members want the Scottish Government to have the powers to fix this, then give us the powers. Give us control over pensions and we will fix it tomorrow.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman has asked us to tell him what powers the Scottish Government have to help in this situation. Well, under section 28 of the Scotland Act they can create a new benefit, and they can make that argument on the basis of, but not because of, old age—the Department for Work and Pensions has accepted that argument. Further, section 26 allows the Scottish Government to make short-term payments to people who need them, “to avoid a risk to the well-being of an individual.”

The Scottish Government have the powers. They choose not to use them. [Interruption.]

Ian Blackford: The hon. Gentleman should—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I want to hear the right hon. Gentleman. I was about to try to quieten down the House in order that I might be able to hear him, but I realise that most of the noise is coming from those behind him. He is making an important speech, and those behind him are trying to support him, but they are being a bit noisy about it.

Ian Blackford: The simple fact is that the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government do not have the ability to introduce new benefits based on age. What is really important, and the hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson) should reflect on this, is that this is a failure of UK Government policy. Nobody can get away from that. Are the Conservatives in Scotland really saying that the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government should again clear up the mess left by this Conservative Government? The Scottish Government have already spent £400 million mitigating the worst effects of Tory austerity.

That is the reality—[Interruption.] I see the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) chuntering. Maybe he could answer this question. Was he one of those who signed the WASPI pledge? Did he say to his voters that he would stand up for the WASPI women? If he is true to his word, he has to come through the Lobby with us this afternoon, or his words will be shown to be meaningless and a fraud on the people of his constituency.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I am concerned that the right hon. Gentleman is not willing to listen to Government Front Benchers. I am sympathetic to the WASPI women, of whom there are nearly 10,000 on the Isle of Wight, but the reality is that he can do something about it, but he will not. He is not taking interventions because he would rather score political points than fix this problem.

Ian Blackford: That is pathetic, absolutely pathetic, because it demonstrates well and truly that the hon. Gentleman has not been listening. I have listened to Government Front Benchers in debate after debate in which they have been given the opportunity to do something about this. We introduced costed proposals in the last Parliament. The Minister, like countless Ministers before him, wants to sit on his hands. He wants this issue to go away, and I can tell him that this issue is not going away.

Several hon. Members rose—

Ian Blackford: I will make progress before giving way again.

The Government have an opportunity today to do something about it. I remind the House that 250 Members of Parliament have presented petitions on behalf of WASPI women. That is 250 Members of Parliament who I expect to go through the Aye Lobby tonight. There is no point signing a petition unless they are prepared to go through the Lobby, otherwise they have duped the WASPI women. I trust that no Member would wish to do that.

Our motion is a simple one. It calls for mitigation. It is written in a way that allows all Members of Parliament to recognise the injustice that women born in the 1950s are facing, and it allows the Government to bring forward proposals. Let me state at the beginning of this debate that if parliamentary democracy means anything, the House must divide on this motion. The Government must either support mitigation, which we are calling on them to do, or they must have the guts to vote against it.

Now is the time for Members on both sides of the House to signal that we need to put mitigation in place. Let us stand up today for 1950s women, because I believe parliamentary arithmetic is on our side.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Blackford: I will give way one more time.

Mr Cunningham: I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. He and I have been involved in a lot of debates. I think the Government can find this money. It is no good their trying to blame the Scottish Parliament. This is a UK issue, full stop. I assure him that I will be backing him in the Lobby today.

Ian Blackford: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I hoped he would be backing me, and he has been resolute on this issue over a long period of time. He is absolutely right; we can find money on the magic money tree for Northern Ireland and, as I said in the Budget debate only last week, we found £70 billion for quantitative easing last year. A £70 billion cheque was written for the Bank of England to put into the financial markets, so do not tell us that the Government cannot find the money. Of course, the answer to the question is that the money is there because the national insurance fund is sitting on a surplus.

James Cartlidge: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Blackford: I must make some progress. I will not take interventions for a while.
The moment has never been so opportune for Members on both sides of the House to come together to do the right thing and to call for this long-standing error to be corrected. Conservative Members made a pledge to the WASPI women as recently as June 2017. Scottish Tory Members—I will not name them, but they know who they are—signed the WASPI pledge before the general election and claimed to be prepared to act against party orders on the issue. There has been a deafening silence from them on this matter since the election, and the heckling has gone.

The House might be interested to know that, in the constituencies represented by Scottish Conservative Members of Parliament, a total of 84,000 women are affected by this Government's legislative changes. I ask this question of the Scottish Tories, in a friendly spirit, particularly to those who supported the WASPI women during the campaign: will they have the courage to join us in the Lobby this afternoon, or will they turn their backs on the 84,000 WASPI women in their own constituencies?

I flag up to them page 62 of the Scottish Conservative manifesto, which states:

“We will also ensure that the state pension age reflects increases in life expectancy, while protecting each generation fairly.”

So, today, Scots Tories, do the right thing.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): The nub of the matter is that people are living longer and contributions were calculated on the basis of people not living so long. Although I sympathise with what the right hon. Gentleman is saying, the debt burden would be increased on our children and grandchildren, and that is grossly unfair.

Ian Blackford: I am grateful that DUP Members will be going through the Lobby, but let me point out that we are trying to set out the facts of the arguments in this House. These women have for too long been let down by politicians, so let us use the opportunity we have today to give them the result they deserve. Thanks to freedom of information requests, we learned that the Department for Work and Pensions only began writing to women born between April 1950 and April 1955 in April 2009, and did not complete the process until February 2012. So it was writing to women to inform them about changes in legislation that go back to 1995 but it did not start the formal notification period for 14 years. Taking 14 years to begin informing women that a pension they had paid into was being deferred is quite something. Can we imagine the outcry if a private pension provider was behaving in such a way? There would be an outcry in this House and, no doubt, legal action. When we consider that entitlement to a state pension is earned through national insurance contributions, where many women have made contributions over 40 years, this is stunning.

A woman born on 6 April 1953 who, under the previous legislation, would have retired on 6 April 2013 would have received a letter from the DWP in January 2012 with the bombshell that she would not be retiring then—she would be retiring in July 2016. That is three years and three months later than she might have expected, and this is with 15 months’ notice. That is what Conservative Members have been defending, and it is no wonder the WASPI women are insulted. We are talking about 15 months’ notice before what they thought was a contract they had with the Government was simply to be ripped up.

A pensions White Paper published in December 1993 stated:

“In developing its proposals for implementing the change the Government has paid particular attention to the need to give people enough time to plan ahead and to phase the change in gradually”.

Not much there that I would disagree with, but when you accept the need for people to plan ahead, you need to write to them and tell them.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I am secretary of the all-party group on state pension inequality for women, as the right hon. Gentleman knows. A serious point for WASPI women is the number of women in their 60s who did not receive a letter. Their pensions were deferred until they were 63, even though they should have received them at 60, but they were not told at the time of those deferments that they should have received them three years earlier. This is another scandal about how the DWP has not been honest in those letters. Does he agree that that is something else the Government should be looking to address?

Ian Blackford: Again, I am grateful for that intervention, and the hon. Gentleman is correct in what he says. This is yet another clear example of why there is absolutely no excuse for not collectively taking action today. We have...
a choice: we can recognise the injustices that the women have faced or we can sit on our hands and do nothing. This is about morality. It is about doing the right thing. The Minister can look up to the skies, but it is not going to remove the problem for him. I do not want to wait until the end of the debate and then get another 10 minutes of ignoring the reality of what is going on. We have had that for too long and it has to stop—it has to stop today.

The intent was there in the 1993 White Paper, but it was 2009 before any formal letters went out. Then we have the issue of phasing this in gradually. What we are dealing with is an increase in a woman’s pensionable age by three months for each calendar month that passes. It is simply scandalous that a woman’s pensionable age is increasing so rapidly. It is indefensible and it is not within the spirit outlined in the Government’s White Paper in 1993.

In October 2002, while giving evidence to a Select Committee, the DWP suggested that the role of the state was “to provide clear and accurate information about what pensions will provide so that people will understand how much they can expect at retirement before it’s too late to do something about it.” How does “before it’s too late to do something about it” equate with 15 months’ notice? How can the Minister, and how can anyone who is not going to support our motion today, support that lack of notice? It has gone quiet now, has it not?

James Cartlidge: The right hon. Gentleman has to find a way to pay for this and he did say that he would still use the national insurance fund. Ruth Kelly, the then Financial Secretary to the Treasury, said the following in 2003:

“The national insurance fund provides security for those contributory benefits. It is ring-fenced and cannot be used for other Government expenditure.”—[Official Report, 21 October 2003; Vol. 411, c. 231WH.]

Ian Blackford: The hon. Gentleman is going to have to do better. Of course this is ring-fenced—it is for pensions. Pay it out! That is what the Government are being asked to do. As I was saying, no formal communication took place until 2009 and the task was not completed until 2012. The DWP has to take responsibility for this failure to communicate and, crucially, for the lack of time that women have had to prepare for an increase in their state pension age. Rather than recognising that women deserved to be communicated with directly, the DWP issued leaflets headlined “Equality in state pension age”. Can anybody in this Chamber remember them? No, I do not recall seeing them either. That is no surprise, as DWP-commissioned research in 2004 highlighted that only 2% of respondents mentioned that they had been notified of changes to their pension age via a leaflet. That is the responsibility that the Government took to inform people. Frankly, it is an insult that the Government at the time thought that changes that affect a woman’s retirement age could be delivered with a leaflet. That was an abdication of responsibility and we have to take responsibility for that. We should all receive an annual statement from the DWP on our expected entitlement, just as we do from private pension providers.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Ian Blackford: I apologise to my hon. Friend, but I have to move on because of the time.

The failure to communicate was highlighted by a 2004 DWP report called “Public awareness of State Pension age equalisation”, which stated that only 43%—less than half—of all women affected by the increase in state pensionable age were aware of the impact on them. If the Government accept that women were not informed in a timely manner and therefore did not have time to react, why do they not accept their responsibilities? I am watching the Minister and he is looking away. He is not interested because he simply does not want to hear the facts. When will he accept his responsibility for the WASPI women and engage in a constructive manner?

The Government sent out 17.8 million letters on automatic state pension forecasts to men and women between May 2003 and November 2006 but—wait for it—the letters did not contain any information about state pension age. You simply could not make this up. What they did say was:

“If you want to know more about the changes to State Pension age, please see Pensions for women—Your guide… See page 10 for details about how you can get a copy of this guide.”

That, Minister, was no way to convey information. What should have been communicated was accurate, clear and transparent information. It was yet another failure to do that by the Minister’s Department—another massive failure to communicate from Government. What is he going to do about it? Nothing.

On 23 November 2016, in answer to a written question I submitted, the previous Pensions Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Watford (Richard Harrington), stated:

“The Government has committed not to change the legislation relating to State Pension age for those people who are within 10 years of reaching it. This provides these individuals with the certainty they need to plan for the future. We recognise the importance of ensuring people are aware of any changes to their State Pension age”.

I welcomed that statement, but that recognition of the need to ensure that people are aware of changes was not afforded to 1950s women. If that statement from the previous Minister in 2016 is to have any credibility, the current Minister has to accept that the women affected were not given that courtesy and the Government need to correct that today.

I shall set the socioeconomic scene in which female pensioners find themselves under this Tory Government. Only 52% of women are adequately saving for retirement, compared with 60% of men. Female pensioners have a net weekly income that is approximately 85% of that of their male counterparts. More than two thirds of pensioners who are living in poverty are women. In August, the Institute for Fiscal Studies revealed that the increase in state pension age has left 1.1 million women £50 a week worse off. The IFS looked into the Government’s reform of the state pension, which was needed to account for a longer-living population, and found that the move to increase the eligibility age for women from 60 to 63 meant that income poverty rates were “pushed up substantially” from 15% to 20%. That is just as a result of the increase in the pension age from 60 to 63. Is the Minister going
to defend that? Are the Tory MPs from Scotland, bearing in mind their constituents, going to defend that? There has been an 8.7% rise in the chance of a woman aged 60 to 63 being in absolute poverty.

In my constituency of Ross, Skye and Lochaber, there are 5,400 women who were born in the 1950s and are affected by the changes to the state pension age in 1995, 2007 and 2011. Throughout Scotland, the figure is a staggering 347,000. New freedom-of-information figures have revealed that although almost 4,600 maladministration complaints relating to WASPI women have been received by officials at the DWP, only six investigations have been concluded. The process of dealing with the complaints has taken so long partly because the DWP has only three staff members dealing with the complaints. Three staff members dealing with 4,600 complaints—that is how seriously the Government are taking this issue. The delays have been so long that the pensions ombudsman has now forced the independent case examiner to streamline the process. What a farce!

That is an indication that the Government simply do not take their responsibilities to the WASPI women seriously—another let down from this Government for 1950s WASPI women. The Government have a commitment to the WASPI women and should stop playing fast and loose with their rights.

In a Westminster Hall debate on 5 July, the Minister talked about employment or retraining opportunities for 1950s women, stating—that the Government had “extended apprenticeship opportunities”. There we have it: women who in some cases have worked for more than 40 years can go on apprenticeship schemes. Later in his speech, the Minister claimed:

“I realise it is not going down well”.—[Official Report, 5 July 2017, Vol. 626, c. 143WH.]

It is little wonder, because 1950s women do not want apprenticeship schemes; they want their pensions.

Women born in the 1950s do not want to be pushed on to benefits, but that is what is happening. Between August 2013 and August 2017, the number of people claiming jobseeker’s allowance or universal credit across all ages fell by 42%. We welcome that, but the number of 60s-plus women claiming a benefit rose by 9,500—a 115% increase—while the number of women aged over 60 claiming employment and support allowance increased by 121,000. That is a massive increase of 413%—that is the reality of the sharp increase in the state pension age for women. The reality is that women are being denied their pension and this Government are forcing them on to benefits. The Minister has been ridiculed by, among others, the Financial Times, in which he was described as one in

“a line of pensions ministers with no interest in pensions”. He certainly has no interest in women’s pensions. Today, the Minister must start to take an interest and do the right thing by putting mitigation in place.

It is nothing short of a disgrace that the Government found no remedy for the WASPI women in last week’s Budget. The Chancellor stood at the Dispatch Box and extolled the virtues of spending billions on Brexit, but he failed to address the injustice faced by female pensioners. Transitional measures to mitigate the issue would cost significantly less than the UK Government’s £30 billion figure. Last year, independent research commissioned by the SNP showed that the cost would be £8 billion. We can find billions for Brexit and billions for Trident, but not one penny for our pensioners, who are treated with contempt by the Government. It is bitterly disappointing that the Chancellor did not use the Budget to support the WASPI women. Once again, it falls to the SNP, by securing this debate, to be a voice for this campaign in the House and to press the UK Government to do the decent thing. They have got it wrong—admit it and fix it now.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Before I call the Minister, I should warn Members who wish to take part in the debate that time is of course limited. In order that they might tailor their proposed speeches accordingly, there will be a time limit of three minutes.

3.27 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): Since world war two, we have seen a dramatic change in life expectancy. We are living longer, staying healthier, fighting diseases that previously would have killed us and leading a more active lifestyle, regardless of age. Faced with demographic pressures and increased life expectancy and costs, successive Governments have acted. We must be realistic about the demographic and fiscal challenge that these changes create for us as a society.

Taking forward-looking action is critical to protecting the long-term sustainability of the state pension not only for today’s taxpayers, but for future generations. In July, the Government published their first review of the state pension age, which sets out a coherent strategy targeted at strengthening and sustaining the UK state pension system for many decades to come. It accepts the key recommendations of John Cridland’s independent review, which consulted a variety of people and organisations, including the Scottish National party—the bringing forward to 2037 to 2039 of the increase in state pension age from 67 to 68.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): Will the Minister explain to the House the potential debt impact on future generations of spending up to £39 billion reverting to the 1995 timetable, as well as of Labour’s plan to freeze any increases in the state pension age, which would cost hundreds of billions?

Guy Opperman: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention. I recognise that he has more than 25 years’ experience of working in the pensions industry through his previous journalistic work. The reality is that if the Pensions Acts 1995 and 2011 were to be revoked, it would cost well in excess of £70 billion. If we were to follow the path set out in the Labour party manifesto, which would keep the state pension age at 66, it would cost approximately £250 billion compared with the itinerary set out by the independent review commissioned by the Government and produced by John Cridland.

The Cridland review is very clear on that point. It says:

“In 1917 King George V sent the first telegrams to those celebrating their 100th birthday. 24 were sent that year. In 2016 around 6,000 people will have received a card from Her Majesty the Queen. In 2050, we expect over 56,000 people to reach this milestone.”
[Guy Opperman]

Three factors are at play here: a growing population; an ageing population as the Baby Boomers retire; and an unprecedented increase in life expectancy. A baby girl born in 2017 can expect to live to be 94 years and a boy to be 91. By 2047 it could well be 98 and 95 respectively...The world of the Third Age is now a very different one, in which those lucky enough to get the State Pension will on average spend almost a third of their adult life in retirement, a proportion never before reached."

It was clear that the Government had to act.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Can the Minister tell us what specific help Jobcentre Plus is able to give older women to help them to retrain or to reskill to find age-appropriate work? That is a question that a number of older women often ask. What specific help is out there for them?

Guy Opperman: Having visited his local jobcentre, my hon. Friend will be aware that a great deal of assistance is provided by the job coaches. However, help comes not just from job coaches and jobcentres but from local job clubs, which I am sure exist in his constituency, as they do in mine; from individual flexible working arrangements; and from jobs fairs, which number of colleagues have mentioned. I have done three myself, culminating in the last one in September, which was highly successful. There is also all manner of private sector support on an ongoing basis.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Guy Opperman: I will give way in a moment, but first let me address the issue in relation to Scotland. I was surprised that the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) refused 10 times to give way. If I were him, I would say that he was frit, but I will not go down that route.

In addition to the substantial support that the UK Government are providing, which is worth £50 billion across the country and 6% of GDP, the Scottish Government now have significant new powers available to them to tailor welfare provision to people in Scotland. Although pensions remain a reserved matter, the Scotland Act 2016 has given the Scottish Government the ability to use a wide range of new welfare provisions.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson) correctly set out the provisions of section 28 of the Scotland Act. There are of course section 24 powers as well. I refer all colleagues, on both sides of the House, to a letter written to my predecessor by Jeane Freeman, my opposite number in the Scottish Government. She says that the power under section 26 “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 women most affected by the acceleration of increase in their State Pension Age. Their needs and the risks to their well-being would have to be assessed individually.”

There is an acceptance in that letter that, as Scottish Conservative colleagues have said, the powers are there. Those powers commenced on 5 September 2016. It is up to the Scottish Government to determine how they will use those powers, but—

Ian Blackford: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am asking for your guidance about what we can do, because the Minister, perhaps inadvertently, is seeking to mislead the House. It is absolutely crystal clear in the Scotland Act 2016 that the Scottish Parliament is not in a position to introduce benefits by reason of old age. That is quite clear, and the Minister should be truthful with the people of this country. He should stop blaming the Scottish National party and the Scottish Government for a responsibility that solely lies here with Westminster.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I will first answer the original point of order. First of all, of course the Minister is being truthful. Secondly, the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) knows that this subject is a matter for debate.

Sir Desmond Swayne: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was just going to observe the contradiction that it is impossible to, as the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) said, “inadvertently seek” to mislead the House. One either misleads the House seeking to do so or not.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that helpful advice. I suggest that we move on, because time is very limited and we do not want to delay the debate further with continuous points of order.

Guy Opperman: I fully understand, and I will move on, but I will make one single point in reply to the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber. I specifically read the letter of 22 June from Jeane Freeman, quoting what she said. When the right hon. Gentleman criticises me, he should be aware and conscious that he is criticising someone from his own party.

Ross Thomson: Regarding the point of order, does the Minister agree that the argument can be made that people under the retirement age of 66 are not in old age? The Scottish Government have already been in correspondence with the Department for Work and Pensions, and the DWP has accepted that very argument. The Scottish Government have the powers, they just do not use them.

Guy Opperman: The reality of the situation, given the motion facing us today, is that one has to ask what the Scottish Government are doing. My hon. Friend is entirely right.

The issue dates back to 1995, when the Government legislated after two years of debate and consultation to equalise the state pension age in order to eliminate gender inequalities in state pensions. There had been welcome increases in life expectancy, and there was an anticipated increase in the number of pensioners in the years to come.

David Linden: Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: I will give way for the last time. I am conscious that 20 Members wish to speak.

David Linden: I have come through an apprenticeship on how this works. The Minister made a point about jobcentres, but he is actually closing half of Glasgow’s jobcentres. I have a question for him about life
expectancy—I asked him this 10 days ago in Westminster Hall, so he has had 10 days to find out the answer. Can he tell me the life expectancy in Glasgow East?

Guy Opperman: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that, without a shadow of a doubt, life expectancy has increased in all parts of the country and in all socioeconomic groups over the past 30 years. I refer him to the Cridland report, which accepts the situation that has existed for the past 30 years, and the change that has been made.

Developments in policy have included the Pensions Act 1995, as well as the Pensions Act 2007, passed when the Labour party was in power. It is a shame that the Labour party is now scrapping the fiscal prudence that it seemed to demonstrate with the 2007 Act by now revoking its desire to increase the pension age beyond 66. Under the coalition, action was taken in the Pensions Act 2011 to increase the pension age as a result of enhanced life expectancy.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: I will not give way any more, because I am conscious that 20 Members wish to speak.

Automatic enrolment was introduced in 2012 on a cross-party basis after a considerable amount of time. The important point is that the overall participation in workplace pensions of eligible female employees in 2012 was 58% but, following the introduction of automatic enrolment, the figure increased to 80% in 2016. For males, the figure increased from 52% to 76% in the same period. The private sector has seen the largest increase in participation in workplace pensions, and there was no gender gap in participation rates in 2016.

In the circumstances, I would respectfully point out that the key choice a Government face when seeking to control state pension spend is whether to increase the state pension age or to pay lower pensions, with an inevitable impact on pensioner poverty. The only alternative is to ask the working generation to pay an even larger share of their income to support pensions.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Guy Opperman: I am not going to give way again—I am so sorry.

While increasing longevity is something to be celebrated, we must also be realistic about the demographic and fiscal challenges it creates for us as a society. Since the early 2000s, it has been widely recognised that we face big questions as a society about how we ensure economic security for people in retirement, while maintaining fairness between generations.

The Pensions Commission found in 2005 that a state pension age fixed at 65 was no longer sustainable or affordable. Between 2007 and 2014, three separate Acts of Parliament were introduced, each responding to changes in life expectancy by changing the state pension age. At the same time, the state pension has been increased, between 2010 and 2017, by £1,250 a year for an individual who is on a full state pension.

So with increasing financial pressures, as I have described, we cannot change a policy that has been implemented for over 22 years and supported by all three major political parties. The Government have to ensure that the costs of an ageing population are shared out fairly, without placing an unfair financial burden on future generations.

3.40 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I despair, because having stood at this Dispatch Box, led for the Opposition in Westminster Hall debates and worked on the Pension Schemes Bill, with the matter before us taking centre stage, I have spoken about this issue, like a lot of other Members, many times. However, it is not the Scottish National party that I blame for that, nor is it members of the Labour party, and it is definitely not the ’50s-born women who have been energetic, consistent and strong in pushing this issue.

The Conservative party is the reason we are debating this topic yet again, but we know that many Conservative MPs pledged their support for these women by making speeches, by taking up photo opportunities, and by becoming members of the all-party group. A few months ago, I stood here and highlighted the fact that there were no fewer than 37 of them. Among them are the hon. Members for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), for Eastleigh (Mims Davies), for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan), for Salisbury (John Glen), for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones), for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng), for North Cornwall (Scott Mann), for Colchester (Will Quince) and for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan)—that is just nine of them.

This weak Government continue to stick their head in the sand and hope that the issue will go away. I do not know how many more times I or anyone else has to say this to the Minister: the issue is not going away.

I am frustrated and impatient that we are yet again debating this topic when the Government could do something to fix the problem right now. I do not understand the politics of why the Government refuse to address it. They angered the older generation during the general election, and look what happened: their huge predicted majority failed to materialise, and now they are hanging on by the skin of their teeth.

Helen Goodman: My hon. Friend is making a very good case. As a 1950s woman, I am extremely sympathetic to the 4,000 WASPI women in my constituency. Does my hon. Friend agree that what the Government have failed to understand is that some of these women have been working since they were 15?

Alex Cunningham: That is most certainly the case, and the Government need to understand that. My wife herself has been working since that young age.

For some reason, the Government persist in pushing huge numbers of ’50s-born women into financial difficulty and distress. It is time for the Government to put their pride aside and do what is right.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for acknowledging the financial plight of many of these women. Women in my constituency have been forced to sell or remortgage their homes, and to spend the money they had set aside for retirement
now so that they can exist, which will increase the poverty they experience in retirement. That has not been acknowledged at all by the Government.

Alex Cunningham: Indeed it has not, and I am sure we will hear many such examples in the debate.

I have heard stories from numerous women affected by the changes of their desperation and fear—and it is fear—about how they will cope in poverty as they wait even longer for their state pension. Does the Minister understand how difficult it is for a woman in her 60s to retrain and gain employment? The job market and the skills needed in today’s workplace are very different from what they were 40 years ago.

Grahame Morris: My hon. Friend is making powerful points. Does he agree that the Government have an opportunity to act while the ball is in their court and before the collective action for maladministration compels them to act?

Alex Cunningham: That is the case, and I will refer to that matter later in my speech.

We have a system that does not help older people to retrain and get back into meaningful employment. The welfare system has been torn to pieces, disabled people have been humiliated through repeated assessments, and the state pension is becoming increasingly difficult to access.

The Labour party has laid out the approach that we would take to reduce the strain on vulnerable and struggling women. We would extend pension credit to those who were due to retire before the increase in the pension age. That would alleviate the toughest circumstances, and restore the faith and dignity that many people feel they have lost. It would provide support worth up to £155 a week to half a million of the most vulnerable women affected by the increase in the state pension age. We have also proposed allowing those who have been affected to receive their state pension up to two years early at a reduced rate, to give women the choice over what works best for them.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I have a great deal of sympathy for the women concerned, but the issue is how we pay for this—I know that is not something the Labour party tends to concern itself with a great deal. I would support taking money from the overseas aid budget to provide transitional arrangements for these women. Will the shadow Minister show his concern for these women by agreeing to that, or does he put overseas aid ahead of the WASPI women?

Alex Cunningham: We know fine and well that as GDP goes down, the amount of money spent overseas also reduces. The poor overseas also need support. If we need to find this money, we can start by looking within British budgets.

Why do the Government not look at our proposals? Why do they not give these women some hope? We heard from the Minister that the Government’s position is that they will not make further concessions, but I urge him to go back to the Secretary of State after the debate and persuade him to think again.

Earlier this year, the Secretary of State said that he and the Department for Work and Pensions would look into individual cases of hardship. We know from a freedom of information request that the DWP has concluded just a handful of complaint investigations relating to the ‘50s-born women campaign, although more than 4,500 complaints were received. Will the Minister update the House about the progress on those complaints?

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Is not the real problem demonstrated by my constituent who wrote to me a fortnight ago? She was born in 1954, has been in insecure, low-paid work, and has no access to an occupational pension or savings. The Government must address this issue.

Alex Cunningham: I said a few minutes ago that we would hear many examples of the plight faced by ‘50s-born women, and that is yet another one.

Although I agree that this mess was created by the Government, I want to touch on the Scottish Government’s social security powers. I know that there have been some heated exchanges on this subject already. The SNP says that it cannot act to resolve the issue in Scotland because pension provision is reserved to the UK Government. Although that is true, the Scotland Act 2016 gave the SNP Government powers to top up social security or to create new social security policies. The right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) denied that they have the power to introduce new benefits based on age, so will the Minister commit this afternoon to publishing a clear paper outlining exactly what the Government believe the Scottish Government can and cannot do with their powers. Perhaps that would make the matter clear once and for all.

Labour has made a commitment to extend pension credit and provide early access to a state pension, but we cannot deliver that because we are not in government. Therefore, there has to be a challenge to our SNP colleagues: use your powers to help women north of the border and, if they are insufficient, chat to the Government, because they believe you do have the powers.

Mhairi Black: I do not think that anyone on the SNP Benches feels the need for any clarification, because it is already there. We all remember vividly how it was the Conservatives and—it is unfortunate I have to say this, because I am not trying to make a party point—the Labour party that made sure that we did not have power over pensions.

Alex Cunningham: Nobody suggested that the Scottish Government had pension powers; we are saying that they could use social security policy. I suggest again that the Scottish Government chats to the UK Government. I think they just need to get their heads together and talk rationally, but I would rather the UK Government published a paper spelling out the position.

I do not want to keep having to stand here debating this issue. I do not want us to give false hope to the ‘50s-born women who are fighting, because it is their livelihoods we are talking about. I want the Minister to do something—to reach out across the Chamber and work for a real solution—to demonstrate that the House is listening to the residents of this country.
Dr Whitford: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Alex Cunningham: I am nearly finished. Before I conclude, I would like to ask the Minister what the Department is doing in relation to the legal challenge from the WASPI campaigners, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris). Has the Minister made contingencies for the day when the courts rule against the Government, as they may well do, and order that ’50s-born women be compensated? What is happening in relation to that?

Although we support the motion, I think that the House needs to be able to vote on a motion that will be binding on the Government.

Guy Opperman: I will answer two of the hon. Gentleman’s points. First, the Government do not believe that there has been maladministration by the Department for Work and Pensions in relation to the legal claim by Bindmans, and that includes in the 13 years when the Labour party was in power. Secondly, with regard to his assertions about the Scottish Government, the situation is as I said when I cited the letter of 22 June from Jeane Freeman, my opposite number in the Scottish Government.

Alex Cunningham: I am grateful to the Minister for that intervention, but he knows as well as I do that the decisions of successive Governments are overturned in the courts time and time again, and the then Government end up having to pay for it.

I want to see before the House a motion that actually means something, and that is binding on the Government to deliver some of the relief that these women desperately need. We will continue to look for that opportunity, and then we will call on the supporters of ’50s-born women, from both sides of the House, to vote for that relief and make something happen.

3.52 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): We have debated this matter on numerous occasions. It is important that it is not used for the purpose of political expediency, because many people are experiencing serious challenges. We must listen to them and seek to address their concerns in a way that is responsible and financially prudent, but also just and fair.

I have received a great deal of correspondence over the past two years from constituents who have graphically highlighted the challenge that they face. When many of us presented petitions in the Chamber last autumn, I was in second place behind the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for the number of people who had signed, as the Waveney petition was signed by just under 2,250. It was also endorsed unanimously by Conservative-run Waveney District Council.

The impact of the changes is being felt disproportionately in areas of the UK where there has been a tradition of women going out to work—whether in factories, agriculture, fishing, food processing or clerical posts—often part time and not on high salaries. The changes are affecting a lot of women and their families in Lowestoft in my constituency, although many of the businesses in which they worked are no longer there. There used to be, for example, numerous jobs in the fishing support industry and the Sanyo television factory, to name but two.

I acknowledge the challenges that the Government face in addressing those injustices and in coming up with a fair and affordable solution that complies with equalities legislation. I urge them to look carefully at that. There are two private Members’ Bills before Parliament that propose a review of the pension arrangements. One is promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) and the other has been presented by the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris). I am a supporter of the latter Bill, and I urge the Government to consider carrying out a full, proper and meaningful review. For that reason, I will not support the motion tonight, because I do not believe that it provides the evidence base that we need to find a fair, affordable and just solution.

As I have mentioned, this issue disproportionately affects specific parts of the country. I thus ask the Government to carry out research to establish the extent of this problem and to come up with a fair and affordable solution that addresses the pockets of the country in which there is a real issue.

3.54 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The last time I spoke on this matter, I said that I welcomed the opportunity to make another contribution on the WASPI issue, but that was over 18 months ago, and I do not welcome having to make this argument again. It is absolutely ridiculous that this Government have refused to help these women, whose only crime is to have been born in the 1950s. Although the original mistake goes back to 1995, Governments of different persuasions have been culpable. We can sit here and squabble all day about who has done what and who is most to blame, but the problem is in the here and now. The reality is kicking in for 6,200 women in Paisley and Renfrewshire North, and for more than 3.7 million women and their families across the UK, so it falls to this Government to fix the mess.

I do, however, welcome the opportunity to pay tribute to the WASPI campaign once again. All these women are asking for is fairness. This is the 11th time that their plight has been debated in this House, and we have had many ministerial responses, which have ranged from the incompetent to the ridiculous and everything in between. I was hoping for a better speech from the Minister given the arithmetic of the House, the natural majority in favour of transitional arrangements, and the—to say the least—precarious position of this Prime Minister and this Government.

I have had discussions with Conservative Members and overheard conversations about this issue in which Members have conceded that this has been bungled. They accepted that many women affected by this reform were only told about the changes 14 years after they made, but said it was just too darn expensive to do anything about it. However, times have changed. The Chancellor has found his magic money tree, with £1 billion for the Democratic Unionist party and £3.7 billion for Brexit preparations—a billion pounds here and a billion pounds there: before you know it, it is real money. We have had billions for wasteful spending and cash for votes, but nothing for these women, who have paid into the system all their lives.

With inflation rising faster than at any point in recent years, many of the women affected will face further burdens in relation to their cost of living. It is now more
vital than ever that they are supported, which is why SNP Members will not stop until justice is done. The Chancellor’s Budget was a huge missed opportunity to deliver protection for the WASPI women. As he continues to shirk his responsibility, I hope that the Scottish Tories, who were keen to support the WASPI campaign while seeking election, will vote with their consciences, rather than rubber-stamping the line sent to them by the Whips Office.

In conclusion, I want to echo the words of the former Member for Foyle, Mark Durkan, who has been a great loss to this House. In an impassioned contribution in one of our previous WASPI debates, he said:

“If we fail to pass this motion, we will be saying that those women are an acceptable casualty on the way to equality, and we cannot accept invidious treatment in the name of equality.”—[Official Report, 7 January 2016; Vol. 604, c. 503.]

3.57 pm

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): Equalising the state pension age between men and women is a principle about which the UK Government, the WASPI campaign and I am sure all of us in the Chamber agree. However, there is rightly concern about the unfair and disproportionate impact of the 2011 reforms on women born in the 1950s, and this concern is shared by Members on both sides of the House.

Some 5,200 women in my constituency are affected. Since the general election in June, as Members might imagine, I have been meeting local women who are affected by the changes and who, in some cases, have had to change their retirement plans radically because they were not made properly aware of the changes made by 1995 Act.

One constituent I recently met was employed by NHS Grampian for 39 years. She worked hard and full time for her whole working life, with no maternity leave and no long-term sick leave, until in 2014, during her last few years of work, she had to take a couple of months off for health reasons—first due to cancer of the womb, and subsequently cancer of the bone marrow. She requested retirement, and she was 60 on 1 December 2016, but because of the changes to state pension policy, she is not receiving a state pension, even though she paid in, in full, during her 39 years of working. This has caused her great strain and worry, and she is naturally concerned about her finances.

Last Friday, I met a 61-year-old constituent who expected to receive her state pension in 2016. She also contributed through national insurance for more than 40 years. When she received her first letter about the age changes from the DWP back in 2013, she was in full employment and good health, but her circumstances changed in 2015, when she was made redundant and diagnosed with breast cancer. I am thankful that my constituent has made a recovery following successful treatment to date, but she finds herself with no income, and the downturn in oil and gas in Aberdeen has made it very difficult for her to get even a job interview. At the moment, therefore, she has to rely on the very pot of savings that she worked hard to build up.

I wanted to highlight my constituents’ cases as a reminder that the state pension system is founded on a contributory principle. It is not a welfare benefit. Those cases show that this group of women have done the right thing. They worked hard all their lives and paid their dues in good faith, but now they face being completely short-changed. That is not fair.

We have heard a lot of bluster from SNP Members, but let us be clear that the Scottish Government have the powers to make a change. Their record clearly shows not only their incompetence, but their refusal to use those powers. Let us be absolutely clear: my constituents know that I will make their voices heard loud and clear in this place.

4 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Here we go again: another day, another debate on the injustice facing the 1950s-born women as a result of the pension changes. More than 3 million women have lost out because of the changes to pension law, and more than 3,000 in my own constituency of Swansea East have been unfairly treated by the changes to the state pension.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that many of those women have worked in manual jobs since they were 15 years of age—some of them since they were 14—so they deserve fair play?

Carolyn Harris: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend. These women have been the backbone of our country and they have been betrayed by this Government.

What is really scary is how many women do not realise that they have been affected. Yet this Government are still not listening. They have betrayed these women, stolen their security and shattered their dreams. Without the time to prepare and make the necessary alternative arrangements, very many women born in the 1950s have been left in financial despair.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Equalising the state pension age between men and women is a principle about which the UK Government, the WASPI campaign and I am sure all of us in the Chamber agree. However, there is rightly concern about the unfair and disproportionate impact of the 2011 reforms on women born in the 1950s, and this concern is shared by Members on both sides of the House.

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Dr Whitford: Obviously, this is a UK-wide issue, not one that applies only to women in Scotland. The women I have spoken to are not looking for the kind of crass grants that the Scottish Government can deliver. They do not want to go begging. They actually want what they are due.

Carolyn Harris: I do not want to get involved in the argument about what the Scottish Government can and cannot do, but I agree that this matter affects all women, regardless of their nationality.

Many in this House stand by these women. I call on the Government to make a commitment to look again at this gross injustice, to discuss a productive and constructive way forward for the women affected, and to listen to what we are saying.

Not all women are fit enough to work. Some women who are expected to jump through hoops before they can receive unemployment benefit do so risking their own physical and mental health.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD) rose—

Carolyn Harris: I am going to make progress.

The reality is that these women are desperate. I have women affected all over the country calling my office every day, letting me know that they have had to sell their belongings and that they are relying on family, friends and food banks just to exist. I understand that this might not be comfortable to listen to, but it is the reality. These women are only asking for compassion, for fair play and, more importantly, for respect.

I will continue to call on the Government to stop burying their head in the sand and to do the right thing by these women. My private Member’s Bill is due to have its Second Reading debate in April. It states that these women need reasonable, transitional arrangements to allow them not just to enjoy retirement, but to survive it. So many Members across the House agree that these changes to the state pension age are unjust and unfair, and that these women have been robbed of their pension. When will the Government recognise the mistake they have made with the 1950s women? These women will not be ignored.

4.6 pm

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Over the past two and a half years I have met many constituents who have been directly affected by the various changes to the state pension age. Listening to them, it is impossible not to feel every sympathy, given the circumstances in which many find themselves. If I suddenly found out that I would not be able to retire at the age I had expected, I am not sure that I could say how I felt—actually, I probably could, but I fear my language would not be parliamentary.

As a teenager in the early 1990s, I probably did not pay as much attention to women’s pensions as many other people did, but I do remember the announcement in 1993 that the state pension age would have to be equalised upwards. There was widespread publicity at the time, through the media and the leaflets that have been referred to. None the less, it is clear that many women, for one reason or another, were genuinely unaware of that. As late as 2012, 6% of the women affected still expected to retire at 60, despite the Department for Work and Pensions having sent out 11 million leaflets and letters. However, that was significant progress since 2004, when just 73% of the women affected were aware of the 1995 reforms.

Clearly there are solid reasons why successive Governments here and in many other developed economies have been increasing and equalising the state pension age. The fact that even a relatively small proportion of people affected were unaware of changes that will have such a large impact on their retirement raises broader issues about how public authorities communicate pension matters, and Government at all levels need to consider that.

The truth is that the state pension age will not be reduced to 60—arguably, that would be illegal under anti-discrimination legislation—so we must look at what can be done not only to help those women born in the 1950s back into work, but to help all those who will find themselves working later in life. I hope that the Government can come up with further suggestions on what support can be provided.

4.9 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): When people ask me what it is like at Westminster, I often observe that I live in a parallel universe from the Tory party—I am sure its Members feel the same about me. We all inhabit a political bubble, but let me recall some of the concerns I have heard from Tories recently: whether Big Ben is going to bong, whether Clerks in the House are allowed to wear wigs, whether it is credible for MPs to ask questions in the Chamber without wearing a tie—these are some of the things that have concerned Tories recently. I have also heard them say that when they visit jobcentres people tell them, “It’s great being on universal credit. When I’m on universal credit, I find work.” They do not see the irony that they are meeting these people in the jobcentre. The Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), said that WASPI women should be able to get apprenticeships, and the Chancellor recently said that there were no unemployed people. They have also said that the majority of people knew about the changes to the pension age. They live in a different world from me.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): What exactly is wrong with a 65-year-old woman taking up an apprenticeship? I am not talking about all women, but why would the hon. Gentleman deny any woman the chance to work at 65?

Alan Brown: That is a nonsense argument. I would hope that that woman would not get paid the apprenticeship levy. The Government have a shocking minimum wage for apprenticeships. The hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) stood up during the Budget debate and said that the people of Taunton Deane had thousands of pounds more in their pockets. It really is a different world.

People on universal credit struggle as their debts increase. Food bank usage is up. Only this month, a British Medical Journal study estimated that up to 120,000 deaths in England and Wales could be attributed to the
Tory austerity policy since 2010, and people over 60 are most at risk. This only touches on the world that some of the WASPI women inhabit: having to sell homes and downsize to survive; mental health problems associated with the stress; the humiliation of seeking jobs; marital pressure and break-ups; just living with the daily anger and disappointment at being let down by the state and a Government who refuse to listen.

In a previous SNP Opposition day debate, the then Secretary of State challenged our £8 billion costed proposal to reverse the Pensions Act 2011. He said that we need to look at the longer-term horizon and that it would cost £30 billion to 2025. Well, just a few months later, the Tories trooped through the Lobby following the Budget and voted for £30 billion of tax cuts, including £23.5 billion in corporation tax giveaways. So even if it would cost £30 billion, it could have been found, and it was there in the last Budget. The Budget, which has just been passed, contained a £3.2 billion stamp duty tax giveaway that will only increase house prices, £3.7 billion for Brexit preparations and an additional £7 billion for a national productivity fund. I welcome that money, but it shows that the magic money tree exists and that money can be found whenever the Tories want it.

We have heard the argument that the state pension age equalisation is all because of the bad EU—it is EU rules that have forced it upon us—but I have not heard one of the mad Brexiteers in the Government come to the Chamber and say, “One of the benefits of leaving the EU is that we can reverse the 2011 Act”. They have never said, “Let’s stick it to the EU, take it on and give these women what they deserve”. It is high time they gave them what they deserve, and it is high time the Government started listening.

4.13 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I agree with the point of my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood). The WASPI campaigners are very passionate and tenacious, and one obviously sympathises with those who, having saved all their lives, feel they were not given adequate notice. Obviously there is a legitimate grievance there, but the point is that, as parliamentarians, if we decide to go through a Division Lobby and vote for something—to join a cause, to jump on its bandwagon—we must have a credible, funded policy to stand behind, otherwise we are selling snake oil. Once again, we have it from the SNP. It stills says we can use the national insurance surplus. I will read out a few more written answers about the ability to use the surplus, which is their policy for saving the WASPI women.

In March 2008, the former Minister Mike O’Brien said:

“Any surplus of NICs over social security benefits in any one year... is not ...an extra resource available to spend.”—[Official Report, 5 March 2008; Vol. 472, c. 2605W.]

In February 2009, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) asked the Chancellor of the Exchequer

“What assessment has made of the merits of using future national insurance fund surpluses to fund an increase in the state pension.”

That was Labour’s policy at the time. The right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), then a Minister, replied, on behalf of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, “Any increase in the basic state pension has a cumulative impact on Government spending going forward. The Government consider the short-term use of the surplus on the national insurance fund in this way to be unsustainable in the long term.”—[Official Report, 10 February 2009; Vol. 487, c. 1852W.]

That is not least because it has been in deficit and it is cyclical. I think that any of us who claim to support the WASPI women must say which line of taxation, or which line of expenditure, in the Red Book we are prepared to use to pay for this.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I am afraid that the position of the Scottish National party is so obviously partisan and unaffordable that it does the WASPI campaign no favours, but for all that, there are women in my constituency who were not notified and who are clearly experiencing hardship. Does my hon. Friend agree that it would be far more constructive to consider sensible, affordable measures, such as the early draw-down of bus passes, which could help to address the genuine need that exists?

James Cartlidge: Of course there are measures that we can consider. My point is that unless we can identify specific lines of tax or expenditure to pay for them, the money will simply be borrowed and paid back by future generations.

Mhairi Black: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

James Cartlidge: I should be delighted.

Mhairi Black: I have heard a lot about how no one is coming to us with a plan for what we can do. As I said earlier, we came up with a plan, and we think we can argue for it. If the hon. Gentleman disagrees with it, he should come up with a plan himself. There have been umpteen debates, and we have been waiting for months—years—for the Government to come forward with some kind of proposal, because the 2011 proposal clearly is not good enough.

James Cartlidge: I think the hon. Lady is missing the point. I am not saying that to my WASPI campaigners. I am not full of righteous anger, so high on my high horse that my ears pop, like the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford). If we are to go out on a limb to that degree, we must have a credible policy. We must be able to say, “This is how we are going to pay for it.”

Ian Blackford: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

James Cartlidge: I do not think that I should give way again, but I will, because the hon. Gentleman was very generous to me. However, others wish to speak, so I shall wind up my speech immediately afterwards.

Ian Blackford: We have tabled a very straightforward motion that asks the Government to introduce mitigation measures. The hon. Gentleman has asked for costed proposals, but we gave him one last year in the Landman report, on deferring the increase in women’s pensionable age. It would have cost £8 billion. That is one option. We have done our work; the Government have not done theirs.
James Cartlidge: I gave way to that intervention, so I shall now wind up my speech, because others wish to speak.

Given that £8 billion is a huge amount of money, it is necessary to identify a specific area of taxation or expenditure—other budgets, as an Opposition Member has said. Until people are prepared to do that, we cannot say that a policy is available to fix this. We are just jumping on a bandwagon.

4.17 pm

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): I am grateful to the SNP for securing this important Opposition day debate, and appreciate the opportunity to speak in it. Like every other Member, I have been contacted by numerous WASPI women in my constituency. We all know how much of an impact this has had, and we all know just how upset, frustrated and deeply angry many WASPI women feel.

Before I go on to ask the Government for transition payments, let me point out that we are all culpable. One of the things that I have found so interesting while sitting here listening to all the different arguments is the element of amnesia. Every political party that is represented in the Chamber now is culpable because of the WASPI issues: the Conservatives, the Labour party and possibly, it appears, even the SNP. I do not know that for sure, because I am not a Scottish MP or a Scottish constituent, but I do know that, during the passage of what became the 1995 Pensions Act, the Tories did not tell people what was happening right at the beginning. In 1999 and then in 2001, 2002 and 2003, Labour did not engage in the mass communication that would have warned the women of what was coming—and I hold my hands up as a member of the coalition Government. I do not think that we gave enough information in 2011, when we changed the retirement ages. So the first thing I want to say, despite all the Sturm und Drang in the Chamber, is that I think we have let WASPI women down. End of.

Secondly, I feel that the Government should give serious consideration to finding some transitional money. As a number of Members have pointed out, many of these women, particularly those who are in menial and artisan jobs, will not be in the same physical shape in their early sixties as someone who has not done a backbreaking job for 40 or 45 years. I do believe that the Minister and the Government understand the strength of feeling, the passion, the anger and the exceptional frustration that so many WASPI women feel.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is totally unfair that these women are not paid their pension when they have a full contribution record, and that instead they are being made to work beyond a time when they are able or are forced to rely on insecure benefits that are too low?

Stephen Lloyd: That is an important point about the many years of contributions and of back-breaking jobs.

I return to the fact that we are all culpable; we know that in this Chamber—Conservative, Labour, coalition, and, according to the Conservatives and Labour, the SNP as well. I do not say—because I would be lying to my constituents—that we are going to cancel the new retirement age and take it back to 60; anyone who says that knows they are telling whoppers, and that that is not going to happen.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op) rose—

Stephen Lloyd: I am going to continue.

If there are Members who honestly say that to their constituents—well, I am not going to cast any slurs on anyone in the Chamber. This is having a shocking impact in some parts of the country and on many WASPI women and I believe that the Government have a duty to find some additional money to assist with the transition period. That is the right and the honourable thing to do, and I believe that the Government must find that money. If they do, a lot of WASPI women will, possibly through gritted teeth, accept that transition money and move on with this challenging age change. Without that, however, the anger and the sense of justifiable unfairness will increase, which will leave a real scar for a heck of a lot of women born in the 1950s who have contributed not just to the greatness of our nation, but through the children, grandchildren and families that have made our country what it is today.

I urge the Minister to go to the Chancellor and ask him to find an element of transition money that will at least allow the WASPI women to have the funds, not just to make up for losing the six years, but to cover the money that this has cost so many. I urge the Minister to find a way; find some transition money, make a difference, and do it now.

4.23 pm

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): This is an important cause that affects thousands of women on the Isle of Wight, and I have had the pleasure of meeting my WASPI representatives on several occasions. I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for his words on the issue; he knows I hold him in high regard. The Government have done good work on pensions and in many other areas that have improved the lives of pensioners.

My hon. Friend talked about the importance of fairness. In justification of the WASPI women, they would say that the current system is not fair to them, and it is difficult to argue against that point. I have heard many stories of hardship from WASPI women on the Island, many of whom found out at a very late stage of the day that their pensions would be extremely negatively affected. These are not spendthrift people; they are people who have either raised families or worked hard and paid into the system over many years. It pains me to read stories of hardship from them.

My concern for the Government is that a pensions Bill might force this issue, and I believe that, on the grounds of fairness and common sense, moving in some way to rectify this issue now would be better than being forced to do so later. So if there is a way of putting in place transition payments or a mechanism can be found to alleviate some of the worst problems faced by the WASPI women, who are an admirable cause, the Government would get my full support. I know my hon. Friend the Minister cares about this issue very much.
Jim McMahon: Given the likelihood that the Government will eventually have to change their position, would it not make sense for a good Government to ensure that financial provision was being made for that eventuality now?

Mr Seely: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I am making that point as well. Clearly, voting either way is not going to change things today, but I hope that the Government will consider this matter in the light of any pensions Bill that is introduced later.

4.25 pm

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): We recently heard from the Chancellor about how he had buckled under the immense lobbying pressure of his 13 Scottish Tory colleagues. That pressure supposedly made all the difference to his scrapping VAT payments for Scotland’s police and fire services. Perhaps the half-baked baker’s dozen could have another word in his ear to prove that they understand this situation and that they care about the WASPI women and are seeking to achieve justice for them. If the UK Government make no changes, this will simply show that the Scottish Tories are not as influential as they are made out to be, or that they simply do not care about the plight of the WASPI women. The hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson) spoke as though he truly understood the problem, but will he follow us through the Lobby, or was it all just empty rhetoric?

Can you imagine, Madam Deputy Speaker, what would happen if MPs born in the 1950s were not made aware of major changes to their pensions that resulted in not receiving them until years later? If we debated that—and we would—the House would be full to the gunnels. MPs would be filling every single seat, and the steps in between. How quickly would this House find a political solution to that problem? How quick are we to vote ourselves a pay rise? That is the benchmark that the Government should be judged by. On behalf of the 5,700 WASPI women of Inverclyde, I want to tell the UK Government that we will keep on bringing these debates to the House, that we will continue to raise the issue in the press and that we will not go away until there has been a resolution to the plight of those affected by these pension changes.

The momentum of the WASPI campaign has not weakened. Next week, my office will host a meeting of the Inverclyde WASPI group as it maintains its work on attracting new volunteers and making sure that the affected women have access to advice and support. The campaign has already raised more than £100,000 to fund an initial legal campaign, and the Minister must surely be aware it is now too well organised and well funded for him to continue dismissing its concerns. According to the campaign, 196 Members have committed themselves to assisting it. This should be seen as a signal that the UK Government need to begin a dialogue with the WASPI women and that they have to start that dialogue now. The women are being very reasonable in asking for this opportunity. There may be many small steps along the way to achieving a solution, but the UK Government should see sense and take this first step willingly, rather than being dragged along by the undeniable force of public pressure. It is not too late for this Government to do the decent thing and make amends for this ill-advised, poorly administered and damaging policy.

4.28 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): It is a great honour to speak in the debate on this important issue on behalf of the many WASPI women of Chelmsford who have been to visit me, especially the lovely Cheryl Lucas, who speaks with great calm and compassion on the issue. I have deep respect for them and for the situation they find themselves in. Many of these women have worked for many years and paid their taxes and national insurance contributions. They have told me how they had made plans based on the expectation that they would retire on a certain date, only for that date to be changed. Some of them genuinely feel that they were not consulted or made aware of the change of date. Others had retired early in anticipation—

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Lady is putting her case very well. Is this not why it is such an insult to suggest to older women that things will be fine if they go out and get an apprenticeship?

Vicky Ford: Let me carry on with my point, because I would dearly love to help the WASPI women in my constituency who find themselves in this situation.

I look at the statistics, and as a mathematician, I remember looking at life expectancy a few years ago. My mother is 30 years older than I am, and my daughter is 30 years younger than I am. Of my mother’s age group—those born in 1937—6% will live to 100. For my age group, 16% will live to 100. In my daughter’s age group, it is 26%. We are all living longer, and we all therefore need to work longer. That is why successive Labour and Conservative Governments have been right to take measures to change the pension age.

I have thought about what more we could do to help the women who have been affected. If we give them additional financial or tax benefits, what then do I say to women like me who were born in the 1960s? Why should a woman born in 1959 get an additional benefit, but not the woman born in 1960? I have championed equality all my life, so what do I say to the men when the women get an additional benefit? What do I say to my daughter’s generation, who are struggling with student debt and struggling to get on the housing ladder? They can see that they may never have anything like the workplace pensions that we have had.

The jobs that the WASPI women have been doing in the past may often not be jobs that they want to continue doing into their 60s and may not suit them, which is why it is so important that we champion opportunities for some of our older workers—people in their 50s, like myself, and people in their 60s. We should go out and tell employers that these women are fantastic and can really add value. For those who have genuine problems, we must be faster in getting support to them. I was contacted by a WASPI woman just this week who has cancer and needs support, so we need to be quicker. I understand why the Government cannot write a blank cheque, but please let us find some support.

4.31 pm

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford),
The WASPI situation is a stain on this country. Were it not for the decisions made by others, these women would perhaps never have thought of turning to politics or of organising, lobbying, shouting and screaming. People such as Ali Wallis and Pat Milligan from East Lothian are organising and seeking justice for the WASPI women. Some 6,000 women in my constituency are being organised and assisted to follow the four-stage process not to seek their pension, but to seek a maladministration review of how information was not given to them. They meet in my constituency office to plan how to identify the other affected women in the area, and I must pay tribute to my predecessor George Kerevan, who aided and assisted the WASPI women so eloquently.

I must point out that the WASPI campaign’s aim is not the equalisation of pension ages; it is about the transitional state pension arrangements for women born in the 1950s. The campaign recognises the longevity of our population today. The campaign is about the transitional provisions. In March 2016, the Work and Pensions Committee concluded that the communication “has been too little too late for many women, especially given increases in the state pension age have been accelerated at relatively short notice. Many thousands of women justifiably feel aggrieved.”

Among the 6,000 affected women in East Lothian, those aged between 60 and 62 will see their household incomes fall and income poverty will increase due to the changes. Women who were born in the ’50s have paid so much into our system, and they deserve to be treated with dignity and respect, which should be extended to all those nearing pension age or receiving a state pension. Perhaps the Government should take this opportunity to write to the women to set out the situation. If the Government are unable to offer any financial compensation, they should at least point out the maladministration steps that could be taken so that the matter can be investigated.

We stand up in this place for the people who struggle to have a voice. The WASPI women do not have that struggle, but they seem to struggle getting the Government to listen to them. We must honour the women who have contributed so much to our society, listen to what they are asking for and give them the respect that they so rightly deserve.

4.34 pm

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): I welcome this debate—[Interruption.] Excuse me. I would have welcomed the opportunity to put far more points on the record had the leader of the SNP not taken almost 40 minutes with his opening remarks. This is the first debate in this Chamber—[Interruption.] SNP Members may want to hear what I have to say.

This is the first debate in this Chamber in which I have been able to articulate the views of WASPI women in Moray, and I would have appreciated a little more than three minutes. Our previous Westminster Hall debate was secured by the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) in early July, less than a month after I was elected to this place. I had not made a maiden speech and, again, there was a very restrictive time limit. Having previously met Moray WASPI women, I told them that I would not contribute to that debate, and they understood, yet the SNP put out a press release criticising me for it. The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) said:

“Douglas Ross must do the right thing for these women”, despite these women believing that I was doing the right thing for them.

The SNP press release led to comments on social media calling me an “effing snake,” a “little twerp” and a “disgrace to humanity.” In direct response, another message said:

“I think Guy Fawkes had a good idea.”

The SNP has done a lot on this issue, but I agree with the hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) that, despite the wording of the motion, the words from the SNP today do not try to encourage more people to support the motion.

I support the 6,400 women in Moray who are affected by this issue. They all agree on the need to equalise the state pension age, but the biggest issue for me and for them is the lack of communication from Governments of all parties. It is because of that lack of communication that I signed the pledge before the election, and I support the pledge now.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) made a valid point about 53% of women relying on the state pension, compared with a far smaller proportion of men.

Tim Loughton: I offer my hon. Friend some refuelling, because the SNP would benefit from listening to his wise words. Just because we are from a different party, it does not mean that our commitment to the cause is any less. Does he agree that one suggestion that would show willing—it came up in the Budget for other generations—is for the WASPI women at least to be given back their contributions?

Douglas Ross: I agree with a lot of what my hon. Friend says, both now and in previous debates on this issue.

More can be done. There is a lot we can discuss and debate, and I have put myself forward to be a member of the all-party parliamentary group on state pension inequality for women. I signed a pledge before the election, and SNP Members have criticised me every day since I have been elected for not honouring that pledge.

I return to the earlier remarks by SNP Members and by the hon. Member for East Antrim. People can be convinced not by shouting them down every time but by trying to get them to go along with us.

Chris Stephens: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Douglas Ross: I am just finishing.

A constituent contacted me after the last efforts by the SNP. She said, “I just wanted to say I am disappointed at the media response to your support of WASPI in Moray. I do hope your support for us continues and we don’t become victims in the backlash.” I believe WASPI women are already victims—victims of decisions in this Parliament by both sides—and, because they are already victims, I say in the calmest possible way to the SNP that, despite the actions of SNP Members in this debate, I believe the wording of their motion is sensible. If the House divides tonight, I will be joining them to support their motion.
Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross). In my short contribution, I intend to furnish the House with a few examples of the 5,500 women from Airdrie and Shotts who have seen their state pension entitlement cut at short notice. If the Government will not listen to Members on both sides of the House, perhaps they might listen to our constituents and their taxpayers.

My first constituent wishes to remain anonymous. She worked for 43 years and has never been out of work. By the end of 2013 she was exhausted from her work and decided to retire. She knew that she had not yet reached her increased retirement age of 62, but she and her husband calculated their finances and felt that she could and should retire at that time. So she handed in her three months’ notice and it was not until a financial adviser, provided by her employer, visited her home that she found out she could not retire until she was 65. By that time, someone else had been offered her job and she just had to make do, all because of the lack of notice.

The next case is that of Christine Rennie from Airdrie. All her working life she had expected to retire at 60, in 2015, but she was given no notice that that was to be extended until 2021. Mrs Rennie has Crohn’s disease, which is managed by injections into her stomach. The Crohn’s reacts to cold weather, and part of her job as a classroom assistant is playground duty—it does not take me to explain the issues at stake there. Like so many other women in this era, she gave up work to bring up her family and returned to part-time work, with no access to a private pension. She will rely financially on her state pension to retire and she needs it now.

Finally, Ellen Connelly from Airdrie was due to retire aged 60 in 2014, but will now have to wait until 2020, when she turns 66. Highlighting the communications problems once again, Mrs Connelly says she only found out about the state pension age rise via the GMB union magazine. Had she been given proper notice, she would have had the time to find a new job, rather than having to work as a nursing ancillary until she is 66. A lack of notice makes it almost impossible for her to do anything other than continue in that demanding role.

The few cases I have highlighted will not even be the worst examples in my constituency, never mind the rest of the country. They are not the worst we have heard today; they are just a random example from the dozens who have contacted me and will doubtless have contacted others. Every one of these women has had their life turned upside down as a result of the incompetence and intransigence of successive UK Governments.

In conclusion, we all have ladies in our constituencies born in the 1950s who have been impacted by the changes to the state pension age, but there is one thing that does separate us today. Later, some of us will recognise, respect and represent these ladies, and we will be separated from those who will chose to try to ignore them once again. I know where I will be, and that will be in the Lobby backing my WASPI women.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. As time is short, I will focus on a few key issues. I cannot support the motion for a few crucial reasons, the first of which is that the SNP has not clarified its own domestic position adequately to the House. We have heard that there have been many debates on the issue, and the Minister has clarified that there are powers available in the Scotland Act 2016, passed by this House, so I ask SNP Members to consider why the SNP has not addressed this itself in Scotland. Is it simply because it faces declining popularity in Scotland, as reflected in our having more Scottish Conservative MPs?

We all have met WASPI women in our constituencies, and I have spoken to women who have been affected. I am very much aware that these women have been working hard since they were 14 or 15 and have often borne the brunt of caring responsibilities. They have brought up families, and they definitely feel a sense of injustice.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Surely this is about justice, about doing the right thing for WASPI women and about Conservatives joining Opposition Members on the issue. The 31 Conservatives who claim to be supporting the WASPI women—and rightfully so—should join us in the Lobby. Let us have some justice and some proper transitional arrangements.

Rachel Maclean: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but the basis of the claim in the motion is that nothing has been done, and that is simply not the case. This Government have already allocated more than £1 billion to help women. We have heard this morning from the First Secretary of State that the pension age will be equalised by next year. Although I accept that there are women who feel a sense of injustice, this motion is not the way to deal with it. Let us instead look at what the Government have done to improve the lives of older people up and down this country, including in Scotland.

The investment in the NHS has meant that we have seen people receiving better healthcare, enabling them to live fuller active lives, which means participating in the workforce for longer. I was surprised to hear that it might be an insult for a woman aged 65 to be offered an apprenticeship. I know women of 65 who find that a great opportunity—why write off women just because they are 65? The idea does not apply to all women—no one is saying it does—but research shows that when women take up such opportunities at the age of 65, they report increased satisfaction. We all know that participating in the workforce is one of the best ways to improve mental health and a whole range of other outcomes. I reject the suggestion that it is insulting. Government Members like to think about how we can create more opportunities for our people to participate and live fuller lives, at all stages of their lives. It is incumbent on Members from all parties to recognise that and support it.

We need to look into some of the statistics that Opposition Members have made claims about. Having read some briefings, I do not recognise some of the statistics on maladministration, an issue that the Minister addressed. We need to be honest about the communication programme and the fact that women have been able to plan for their retirement. The crux of my argument is that there is no suggestion that the SNP proposal is costed, and I dispute the figure put forward by its Members.
Ian Blackford: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Rachel Maclean: I am sorry but no, I will not. I need to finish.

Ian Blackford: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. This is important. I pointed out earlier in the debate that the SNP published the Landman report last year and it was fully costed. The hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) has made an error by saying that our proposal has not been costed. It has been costed precisely and she should recognise that.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): That is not a point of order, it is a point of debate, and it has simply reduced the time available for other people to speak.

Rachel Maclean: Research has suggested that it might cost £36 billion to implement the proposals. When I speak to WASPI women in Redditch, how am I supposed to say to them, “Let’s not spend money helping your children and grandchildren”—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

4.46 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): It strikes me that some of us in this House might do well to remember that our retirement might be a decision made by the electorate, who have every right to know when they can retire. They would know, were it not for the way in which the House passed legislation in 1995 and 2011 that changed the state pension age for women born in the ’50s and then failed to communicate that effectively.

The changes to the state pension age affect women such as a constituent of mine who recently came to me to tell me that although she had planned for her retirement for almost 30 years, she now found herself having to do two part-time jobs just to remain solvent. This is a woman who had worked all her life, paid her national insurance and tax—

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I congratulate the Scottish National party on selecting this topic for its Opposition day debate. It is one on which I and many other Members—too many to mention them all—have been working. However, I do wish to mention the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) for the sterling work that he has done, the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black), and my hon. Friends the Members for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) and for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), who have raised this issue time and again and have worked hard to encourage Members from all parts of the House to speak in the debate. I agree with the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) that the motion has been carefully crafted to allow anyone to support it—both Government and Opposition Members—and I urge everyone to do so.

If the Government do not take this opportunity to resolve the issue, I remind them that we will have another big debate on this matter in the Chamber on Wednesday 14 December, and I encourage all Members to come along. I say to Ministers: please do not think that you will get off the hook. If this new Session of Parliament has taught us anything, it is that the Government have been prepared, on more than one occasion, to cover their eyes and ears to pretend that suffering is not happening—on universal credit, employment and support allowance, personal independence payments, food banks and now on WASPI. While I have the attention of Ministers for a very brief period, I therefore want to tell them some of the reasons why they should act.

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend and neighbour agree that 5,500 women in Hartlepool have been victimised by the Department for Work and Pensions, and the consequences have been devastating? They have been robbed of the happy retirement that they deserve and forced into food banks and the dysfunctional benefits system.

Grahame Morris: Absolutely. It is something that affects every Member. Often we bring up issues that affect only the north, only Scotland or only Wales. This time, people in every constituency are affected.

Jamie Stone: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Grahame Morris: I really should not give way, because of the time. I do apologise to the hon. Gentleman, but you will admonish me if I give way, Madam Deputy Speaker.
I recently tabled early-day motion 63, which has been signed by 197 Members. A petition was signed by 107,000 people, which led to the granting of a debate. It will take place next week, if it is necessary—if the Minister does not concede the point tonight. May I remind him that the early-day motion has been signed by Members from every party, every nation and every region in the UK?

Every day, I receive completely heartbreaking letters and emails from women who are in dire financial hardship. Many of them have worked and paid national insurance contributions since they were 16. They now find that the deal that they signed with the Government in good faith has effectively been ripped up. We are talking about a contract and a moral obligation on Government.

An unnecessary situation has been created, with a generation of women relying on food banks, selling their homes and being forced to rely on the benefits system. It is degrading, completely unfair and unnecessary.

The failings by consecutive Governments have forced these women, many of whom I have known for years because I live in the constituency that I represent, into poverty and forced them to rely on support from friends and relatives. I am totally convinced of the sincerity of their claim that they knew nothing about the increase in pension age because of the lack of notification. I therefore urge the Government immediately to acknowledge their error, provide all those affected with some level of compensation, and provide those worst affected—those who are waiting six years longer than they had planned before they receive their pension—with some support through a bridging pension. I thank the WASPI women for their support in raising this issue.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Many of the WASPI women watching this debate may feel disappointed that instead of trying to build some consensus, we have had finger pointing, Pontius Pilate-style hand washing and rancour. It is important to note that this is not a party political issue for many women, and certainly not for those I have spoken to. It is a personal issue that has affected their day-to-day lives, so they want Parliament’s collective attention. The hon. Member for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd) has been an exception today, as he was very honest in accepting that all Administrations have played a part in this situation.

We will support the motion for a number of reasons. The first is that it is quite clear—even from successive Governments’ own admissions and from the actions of the Department for Work and Pensions—that people were not given adequate notice of the change. The Pensions Commission said that there should be about 15 years’ advance warning for such changes, but some people had less than five.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): There are 4,000 WASPI women in East Renfrewshire. None of those whom I have met have an issue with their state pension age going up; they simply feel that they were not given enough notice. Is there not a broader question about how the Government communicate with individuals who face serious consequences and life changes as a result of this policy? We need to look at the communication, not just at pensions.

Sammy Wilson: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. Even DWP research found that, especially in the lower income groups, two thirds of women were not even aware of the changes. The very fact that the practice was changed to writing to people individually after 2011 indicates that the DWP recognised that newspaper adverts and leaflets were not sufficient.

The second reason why we support the motion is that these changes have hurt people in the lower income brackets. Look at the hardship that has been caused. Research shows that the impact on people with lower incomes is five times the impact on people with higher incomes. There is an issue not only of communication but of fairness, and that has to be dealt with. Poverty among 60 to 64-year-olds has already gone up by 6.2% as a result of the impact of the changes.

We support the motion even though it has been said that it is not specific. At this stage, it is probably right that it is not specific, because a range of remedies could be introduced to deal with the issue. I accept that not all those remedies will please people—for some, no remedies will. I want to be responsible, and I understand that we cannot simply rewrite pensions history and say, “Let’s undo all that has been done.” It is too costly. But there are a range of remedies, and the motion gives the Government the opportunity to come back with ideas within the financial restraints that they face at present. Those ideas can be knocked around and debated, and we can see what impact they would have and whether they target the people who are hit most badly. But at least let us have some recognition that there is a problem caused by bad communication, and that that problem hits certain groups of people, especially those on low incomes who are coming to the end of their working lives. Let us find a way to deal with it.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I have no wish to be disrespectful to anybody in the House, but I have to say that some of the comments I have heard from the Government side of the Chamber have been unmitigated piles of mince.

The injustice that has been visited on women born in the 1950s is widely accepted by most people, except the Conservatives, who continue either to tell those women that they can seek apprenticeships—we heard that again today, justified by the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), who is not in the slightest bit embarrassed by her comments—or draw down their early bus passes. You could not make this up. Apparently, the message to WASPI women suffering hardship right now is, “Don’t worry about it. Do you know what? You’re going to live longer and you might even get a telegram from the Queen, so that’s alright.”

Jamie Stone: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Patricia Gibson: No, thank you.

The message is, “Don’t worry if you’re short of money now. Don’t worry if you can’t pay the rent. One day, if you hang on long enough, the Queen might send you a wee card.”

No one doubts that people are living longer. No one doubts that we need to have pension equalisation. That is not the issue at hand today; the issue at hand is the
poverty these women are living in because this Government did not give them sufficient notice to make alternative plans.

Jamie Stone: Will the hon. Lady give way on that point?

Patricia Gibson: No, thank you.

That is what today’s debate is about, so Members should not come to the Chamber and talk about apprenticeships and about how we are all living longer. That is nothing to do with what this debate is about.

To add insult to injury, new freedom of information figures reveal that the DWP has received thousands of complaints relating to the WASPI campaign, yet only six investigations have been seen through to completion. Despite the so-called dedicated complaints team, thousands of women have been let down and robbed of a pension, with questions unanswered.

What about the Prime Minister’s vow to tackle “burning injustice”? I continue to wait for evidence of that. What about the Tory MPs from Scotland who pledged their support to the WASPI women but who will stand up today, give those women tea and sympathy and then go on to abstain in the vote? They are a disgrace. They should hang their heads in shame.

It is time that this burning injustice was addressed. It is time for the Government to stop giving these women a deaf ear. They should take off their brass neck and do the right thing. It is time to give WASPI women the justice they deserve.

5.1 pm

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): I thought I would never hear the likes of it, but I have: the idea that the solution is for people to draw down their bus pass; or that, somehow, it is not offensive—I am looking at the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean)—to offer a 65-year-old woman an apprenticeship. That is completely out of touch with this nation, and I am offended on behalf of these women.

I want to challenge the premise that everyone is living longer. Are the poorest in this nation living longer? I would also challenge the premise that, just because someone lives longer, they should work longer and not actually live longer after their working life.

Five thousand women in my constituency are affected by this pension age increase and by the woeful and inadequate notice they received of the changes. I met those women during the general election campaign, as other Members met women in their constituencies, and they made a massive impression on me.

There are now 190 Members in this House who said they would support the WASPI women. I hope that that was not just an election gimmick—I am looking at the Scottish Conservatives. Anybody who has supported these women needs to do that now. They have to keep their contract with those women in deeds and not just words. [Interruption.] I see that the Whip has just done the rounds of the Tories, but I hope that that was not to put pressure on them. They should come into the Lobby with us.

My own mam was born in 1953 and started work at the age of 13. She worked for 47 years and thought she would get her pension at the age of 61; actually, she will get it at the age of 65 and two months. To this day, she still has not received any notification from the Department for Work and Pensions, as is the case for thousands of other women.

I can guarantee this: if these women owed the state any money—if there was any unpaid tax from these women or if there was any bill they had not paid—the Government would be on their backs. The Government would be tenacious in the recovery of that debt, and the communication would be thick and fast.

To witness the disappointment of these women is heartbreaking. Women who could not have worked any harder all their life are being made into dependents at an older age. How degrading is that? The exponential increase in ESA claimants is telling.

Jamie Stone: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Laura Pidcock: I am sorry, but there is not time.

In our universal credit debate, I heard the argument, which I reject, that the system of monthly payments teaches people lessons. But if we apply the premise from that debate—the one about expectations and notification—the Government have absolutely failed. For these women, who have not had adequate time to prepare, who have had inadequate correspondence from the DWP and who are at no fault at all, the right thing to do is to compensate them and to have a bridging pension.

The 1950s women will not give up. They will not go away and they will not forgive this Government if their demands are not met. They do not need apprenticeships or platitudes, but they need pension justice now. Let us have a vote and let us see whose side people are really on.

5.4 pm

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me the opportunity to speak.

I only arrived in this House in June this year and on 21 November I led my first Westminster Hall debate, on the state pension age. I was grateful to the many Opposition Members who attended and spoke up for women in their area and across the country. I was even more grateful to the many WASPI women who turned up in Westminster Hall that day to hear the people who spoke. Sadly, no Government Back Bencher turned up to speak, apart from in interventions.

We cannot beat Father Time; even Big Ben suffers from old age. One day, it will be our turn to retire. As we look back, will we wonder, “If only I had listened. If only I had cared. If only I could turn back time”? If Members cannot listen to me, they should listen to the WASPI women. Members will all have had plenty of letters, emails and Twitter and Facebook messages from their constituents—their own voters; the people who sent them here to listen to and speak up for them.

I am committed to fighting for a better deal for the WASPI women not just in Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill, but across the whole of the UK. It is time to listen; it is time to care—the WASPI women’s time has come.

5.5 pm

Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): I honestly do not think that Scotland has ever been talked about as much in the Chamber as in this debate,
but it is worth reminding everybody that this is a UK-wide problem created by consecutive UK Governments.

I know that it is the job of the person winding up to sum up the debate, but I have been trying to figure out a way to do that without swearing. I will start with the Scottish Conservatives. My hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) eloquently said that they have a brass neck—honest to God, how shiny it is! The amount of rubbish spoken in the Chamber today by those Members is appalling.

I apologise to the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) if he feels that any of my comments in a press release drew unjust criticism to him. However, my criticism is legitimate. He expresses annoyance at not being listened to, but this is the 12th time that we have had to debate this matter since I was elected. If any disrespect is being shown, it is by the Conservatives, who have refused to listen time and again.

**Douglas Ross:** I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way. She would have listened to my speech, in which I said that it was not just me who was criticising the attitude of the SNP, but WASPI women in Moray, who wrote to me to express concern about the attitude of SNP Members, who do not try to get support across the aisle, but simply use the issue to score political points. That will not achieve the right result for the WASPI women.

**Mhairi Black:** Right, I will go over a few points again, just to get this across. In 1995, the then Government did not write to anybody to let them know that they would have extra years added on to their pension—**[Interruption.]** Hold on, I’m getting there. In 2011, this Government came along and said, “Right, see that timetable? We’re going to make it a lot quicker and much more intense.” Bear in mind that no letters were sent out until 14 years after the changes were implemented. Right? Let’s go with that. Conservative Governments—and, to be fair, consecutive Labour Governments—did not pick up on this, so here we are now.

Twelve times we have debated this issue since I was elected and on every single occasion, the Government have abstained. I would like the hon. Member for Moray to tell me what he thinks I should have done that I have not done yet. Can he?

**Douglas Ross:** If the hon. Lady wants me to tell her what she should do that she has not done yet, it is to answer my intervention from earlier.

**Mhairi Black:** Oh, the hon. Gentleman is a pleasure to talk to, but I will move on.

The motion was deliberately written to make sure that it was not party political—**[Laughter.]** I am loving the laughter from Conservatives Members. If they want to tell me what is funny, I would suggest an intervention.

**Ross Thomson:** I thank the hon. Lady very much for taking an intervention. She says the motion was written so that it was not party political. I am afraid that the diatribe we have heard from SNP Members has been nothing but narrow, party political point scoring that has achieved nothing for WASPI and nothing for those affected, and is only in the interests of the SNP. The women affected deserve better.

**Mhairi Black:** The motion says:

“That this House calls on the Government to improve transitional arrangements for women born on or after 6 April 1951 who have been adversely affected by the acceleration of the increase to the state pension age.”

What part of that can the hon. Gentleman not get on board with?

**Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con):** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Mhairi Black:** No, I am moving on. It is a bit rich for the hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson) to talk about the attitude of SNP Members considering some of the guff that has been coming from the Conservatives, especially in the last couple of weeks.

The point is that even when we come to the House with a non-political motion—**[Interruption.]** I suggest you listen as well. We have had more excuses and more of the same; everybody has covered that. Let us remember that these women are guilty of nothing other than when they were born. Only women are getting affected by this. We keep hearing about equalisation, but it is a strange definition of equality when only women get targeted and are told that they are going to be left destitute.

I am coming to the end of my remarks. We are told that these women can get apprenticeships. If anybody cannot see the problem with suggesting that 65-year-olds start a new career and a new pension pot, I am sorry, but I do not know who they are talking to. To be fair to the Minister, that is an opportunity, if people want it, but they should not be forced into it. A better idea is to try paying them their pension.

**Stephen Kerr:** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Mhairi Black:** No, I will not. Sit down!

In conclusion, I have to express some frustration at the Labour party. I am being very gentle on it, because I appreciate that we are all on board with this. My main difference with Labour Members is on the constitutional question, and that is fair enough. Three years ago we were told that we were better together, on the strong shoulders of the United Kingdom. We were told, “Vote no to save your pension.” It has been three years; if we are better together, prove it.

5.11 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Caroline Dinenage):** I start by thanking everyone who has contributed to today’s debate on this important issue. Members on both sides of the House have made passionate and heartfelt speeches and interventions.

A welfare and pensions system is successful only as long as it is sustainable, and as the population balances from working-age pension contributors to those aged over 65, an increase in the state pension age is necessary for the welfare of all. As the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd) pointed out, virtually every
party in the House has either taken the opportunity to raise it, or not taken the opportunity to do something about it.

Jamie Stone: To support my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd), does the Minister agree that the failure to address the issue—for whatever reason, and by whatever party—reflects badly on this Parliament in general at a time when we could do with a much higher standing in public esteem?

Caroline Dinenage: We have taken forward transitional arrangements. It is insulting for Members from parties that have played their part in getting us to where we are today somehow to wash their hands of the matter. I will go on to make a few points, if the hon. Gentleman will forgive me.

Those who are able to work should support those who are not, confident in the expectation of similar support when they reach retirement. Today’s workers provide the support for today’s pensioners, and that is why it is so important that we have the right balance of the contributions that are paid in at present with the pensions that are being withdrawn, and that we adjust pension ages to maintain that balance. Women who retire today can still expect to receive the state pension for 24 and a half years, on average—almost three years longer than men.

As was outlined by the Pensions Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), the Department for Work and Pensions has communicated the timetable for changes to the state pension age since they were first set in train 22 years ago. As my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) pointed out, in response to concerns raised during debates on the Pensions Act 2011 in both Houses, we introduced the £1.1 billion concession that has been mentioned, which staggered the changes and ensured that no one would wait more than 18 months for their pensions, compared with under the previous timetable.

Any further concession would cost significantly more. It would involve asking people of working age—more specifically, today’s younger people, as my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) mentioned—to pay even more for it. Those outcomes simply cannot be justified.

Ian Blackford: Will the Minister give way?

Caroline Dinenage: I am not going to give way to the right hon. Gentleman. He made criticisms in relation to the Budget and the Chancellor, but he went on to speak for a considerable time today, taking more than 40 minutes for himself and depriving Back Benchers of the chance to have their say. I will make some progress—[Interruption.] I want to address some of the issues that have been raised by SNP Members, so if the right hon. Gentleman would like to listen, I will do so.

As has previously been stated—my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson) pointed this out—if the Scottish National party disagrees with the UK Government’s welfare reforms, it has the power to do something about it in Scotland.

The right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) has mentioned on several occasions that the Scottish National party’s Westminster parliamentary group published a report by Landman Economics, which modelled—[Interruption.] I thought he would be keen to listen to this. The report modelled the impact of an option of options for compensating women affected by the 2011 Act. Of these, the Scottish National party’s preferred option was to abandon that Act entirely, returning us to the timetable under the Pensions Act 1995.

The SNP-commissioned report put the cost of this option at £7.9 billion for the period between 2016-17 to 2020-21. As it stands, that is simply unaffordable, but it has the double misfortune of also being wrong. The Landman report significantly underestimates the full costs of returning to the 1995 Act’s timetable. The Government estimate that the cost over that period would be about £14 billion—nearly double—and that figure includes the impact of lost revenue from tax and national insurance, which the Landman report does not fully take into account.

What is worse is that the SNP’s position applies the costs only to the five-year window between 2016-17 and 2020-21. The costs beyond this horizon are simply not included in the option put forward. If the changes we are implementing did not happen, the actual costs to working-age people would be more than £30 billion over an extended period, which is equivalent to over £1,100 per household. I am sure the right hon. Gentleman would like to justify that to his constituents.

The Scottish National party has also suggested using the national insurance fund to pay for the cost of scrapping the Pensions Act 2011. However, that is not the intended use of the fund, and it is worth reiterating that today’s national insurance contributions fund today’s pensions, with an excess of only two months’ outgoing payments at any given time.

The new state pension is actually much more generous for many women, who were historically worse off under the old system. By 2030, over 3 million women stand to gain an average of £550 extra per year as a result of these changes. The acceleration of the increase in the state pension age for both women and men is necessary to ensure the state pension system’s sustainability in the light of increasing life expectancy and more pressure on public resources. In fact, by 2035, there will be more than twice as many people aged 100 and over as there are now.

Failure to act in the light of such compelling evidence would be reckless. Given the increasing financial pressure that I have described, we cannot and should not unpick a policy that has been in place for 22 years. It is simply not affordable, especially when we take into account the fact that the average woman reaching state pension age will get a higher state pension income over her lifetime than an average woman reaching state pension age at any earlier point.

It is important to appreciate the modern lived experience of later life in the 21st century, which has altered significantly since the inception of the state pension in the 1940s. Longer life, better health and continued activity in later decades are reshaping the profile and participation of older people in our society. This includes sustaining work and other economic activity as those over 60 continue to learn, earn, contribute and participate.

Rachel Maclean: Contrary to the assertion by SNP Members that it is an insult to offer an apprenticeship, does my hon. Friend agree that saying that is actually an insult to women who would like to take up—
Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I am sorry, but I think the Minister had finished her speech.

Caroline Dinenage: In fact, I do not think that I had quite finished, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I do not think that anybody is suggesting that older women should be forced to take an apprenticeship. No one is even suggesting that they should be cajoled or encouraged to do so, but I find it insulting that SNP and Labour Members seem to be suggesting that women over the age of 60 should be put on the scrapheap and should not be allowed to do what they want. If they want to take an apprenticeship, they should be allowed to do so.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP) claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.

Question agreed to.

Main Question accordingly put.

The House divided: Ayes 288, Noes 0.

Division No. 50

AYES

Abbott, Rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniacci, Tony
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, Rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, Rh Margaret
Benn, Rh Hilary
Belts, Mr Clive
Blackford, rh Iain
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, Rh Ronnie
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chapman, Douglas
Charalambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Farrelly, Paul
Farron, Tim
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frisch, James
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
George, Ruth
Gethins, Stephen
Gill, Preet Kaur
Girvan, Paul
Glinn, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Healey, rh John
Henderson, Gordon
Hendy, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hollem, Kate
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Khan, Aftab
Killen, Gerard
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lamb, rh Norman
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Lee, Ms Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Linden, David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Loughton, Tim
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Iain 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
McCarty, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGlenn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Anna
McMorrin, Anna
Mears, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Norris, Alex
O’Hara, Brendan
Onasanya, Fiona
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamar, Kate
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Philipson, Bridget
Piddock, Laura
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rodd, Matt
Ross, Douglas
Tellers for the Ayes: Patricia Gibson and Patrick Grady

Tellers for the Noes: Mhairi Black and Mr Alan Campbell

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House calls on the Government to improve transitional arrangements for women born on or after 6 April 1951 who have been adversely affected by the acceleration of the increase to the state pension age.

Ian Blackford: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. We have just had an impassioned debate, and a clear and decisive result. This House has determined that the Government should bring in mitigation for the WASPI women. I am seeking your guidance as to what we now need to do to empower the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to come to the Chamber, recognise parliamentary democracy, and put in place the Government’s plans to respect the motion that the House has passed.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I think that the most useful thing I can do is read out the written statement made by the Leader of the House on 26 October in which she updated the House on the Government’s approach to Opposition day debates. She said:

“Where a motion tabled by an Opposition party has been approved by the House, the relevant Minister will respond to the resolution of the House by making a statement no more than 12 weeks after the debate. This is to allow thoughtful consideration of the points that have been raised, facilitate collective discussion across Government, especially on cross-cutting issues, and to outline any actions that have been taken.”—[Official Report, 26 October 2017, Vol. 630, c. 12WS.]

I think that it is very clear what the Government will do. The right hon. Gentleman may well wish to question the Leader of the House further tomorrow, during the exchanges on the business statement, about when there might be a response from the Government.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Given the amount of time that Divisions on Opposition day motions take, would it be possible to issue Conservative Members with white flags to wave, rather than our having to put up with the inconvenience of a Division?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Well, that is very ingenious but, as the Speaker has said before, it is up to each individual Member to decide which way to vote, or even whether to vote.
EU Nationals

5.36 pm

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House calls on the Home Secretary to introduce legislative proposals in this Session of Parliament, in line with the recommendation in paragraph 45 of the Second Report of the Exiting the European Union Committee of Session 2016-17. The Government’s negotiating objectives: the rights of UK and EU citizens, HC 1071, that the Government should now make a unilateral decision to safeguard the rights of EU nationals living in the UK.

It is the responsibility of each of us—every parliamentarian—to represent all citizens, regardless of who they voted for. We must also all be aware that our actions in this place have consequences, just as our lack of action has consequences. It is now 525 days—75 weeks on Thursday—since the EU referendum, which delivered crushing uncertainty to our fellow citizens who happen to come from elsewhere in the European Union. We can change that: we can take away the uncertainty that has been so damaging for the past 75 weeks.

Our motion contains a direct quotation from a report from the cross-party Select Committee on Exiting the European Union in stating that we “should now make a unilateral decision to safeguard the rights of EU nationals living in the UK.” That is something that this Government should have done months ago, but once again it is up to the Opposition to give them an opportunity to take away the uncertainty and to do the right thing by our fellow citizens. That should apply to EU citizens and to core family members.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman in advance on winning the vote at 7 pm, given that the Government appear to be absenting themselves from democracy in the Chamber. Does he agree that the uncertainty must be cleared up once and for all? Many organisations in my constituency, including the Fraser of Allander Institute, agree that the uncertainty must be cleared up once and for all. Many organisations in my constituency, including the Fraser of Allander Institute, agree that the uncertainty must be cleared up once and for all. Many organisations in my constituency, including the Fraser of Allander Institute, agree that the uncertainty must be cleared up once and for all. Many organisations in my constituency, including the Fraser of Allander Institute, agree that the uncertainty must be cleared up once and for all. Many organisations in my constituency, including the Fraser of Allander Institute, agree that the uncertainty must be cleared up once and for all. Many organisations in my constituency, including the Fraser of Allander Institute, agree that the uncertainty must be cleared up once and for all.

Stephen Gethins: The hon. Gentleman has made a valuable point. I shall say something about universities shortly. The excellence of Edinburgh University is, of course, dwarfed only by that of the University of St Andrews.

I hope that tonight the House will back the ability of EU citizens to remain, and that we will take away that uncertainty. Just as we should be delivering fairness for WASPI women, we should be delivering fairness for EU citizens.

Let us consider the contribution that EU nationals make. Our proposal would benefit not just those in our communities with EU passports, but our entire community. A lot of statistics are bandied about when it comes to the relationship with Europe, so let me give a few examples. There is the £40 billion just to leave the EU—just to keep us standing still—that we will not be able to spend on public services. There are the 80,000 jobs that the Fraser of Allander Institute reckons leaving will cost us in Scotland alone. There is also the £350 million a week that we were promised for the NHS, which we are yet to see. That statistic came from senior Government members who are now in a position to deliver on the promise.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I have two universities in my constituency, and they often rely on the expertise of EU nationals for some of their courses and technology. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that is very important?

Stephen Gethins: I absolutely agree, and I will come on to that shortly. In fact, it is important, not just for universities but across a range of industries.

To add to the statistics I have just given, I will give some statistics applicable to Scotland. Each EU citizen working in my country contributes £34,500 to GDP, which comes to about £4.5 billion overall. Each EU citizen working in Scotland contributes £10.5 million in Government revenue—the taxes we spend on our public services. Frankly, EU citizens are better for the economy than Brexit.

The following is a critical point, which I hope the Minister will touch on when he sums up. Will the Government keep the promise made by Vote Leave—made by senior members of the Government—that “there will be no change for EU citizens...resident in the UK” and that they “will be treated no less favourably than they are at present”? Vote Leave did not tell us much, but it did make promises, and these promises were made by senior members of the Government, who have a responsibility to keep them.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that an EU citizen who came here back in, let us say, 1968, and who had “ILR”—indefinite leave to remain—stamped in their passport but might since have lost their passport, will apparently be required to prove that they have not left the UK for two years since arriving in 1968?

Stephen Gethins: The right hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point about that uncertainty. I have had such cases in my constituency. There are people who have lived here since the 1960s and 1970s and, as far as I am concerned, they have as much right to live here as I do, or as other Members do, but that right has been taken away from them. That is a disgrace to each and every one of us.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab) rose—

Stephen Gethins: I want to make some progress.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): Scaremongering.

Stephen Gethins: There is one way to get rid of scaremongering: to vote with us tonight and give EU citizens certainty. This Parliament has the power to put an end to that uncertainty.

Let me talk about some of the key industries. On the NHS, the Conservatives should be ashamed. Anyone who has spent time in hospital recently or had relatives who have done so, will tell of the outstanding care from all staff in the NHS, including EU nationals. Very few of us will not have been treated by an EU national at some point. Yet the British Medical Association reports
that 45% of doctors are considering leaving and 19% have already made arrangements to do so. That is damaging for us all—each and every one of us.

Seasonal workers make an absolutely crucial contribution on our farms. Just a couple of weeks ago I was speaking to a farmer in my constituency who plants broccoli. He told me that it has to be harvested by hand, and that if the number of seasonal workers continues to go down, the harvest cannot be taken in. That uncertainty is being created for industries in my constituency and, I suspect, in rural constituencies across the UK.

**Catherine West** (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): There are not many rural elements to my constituency, but does the hon. Gentleman agree that the same principle applies to construction, where we could also face a lack of skilled workers, holding up the building of more affordable homes, which are urgently needed, including in my constituency?

**Stephen Gethins** : The hon. Lady makes an excellent point about the construction industry.

The University of St Andrews is a big employer in my constituency, with 22% of its academic staff and 31% of its research staff coming from other EU countries. That is absolutely critical.

I want to touch on the human angle now. It is all very well to talk about statistics and the big impact; that is absolutely critical.

I want to touch on the human angle now. It is all very well to talk about statistics and the big impact; that is something that we are all aware of. I have asked colleagues across the House about EU nationals in their constituencies, and I want to give hon. Members some examples. In Glasgow North, for example, Michèle Gordon, a Scot who is originally from Germany, runs the Language Hub, which helps young and old people to learn new language skills. In Rosyth, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman), Dace Stutane, a Scot who is originally from Latvia, volunteers in the community garden to cultivate vegetables to give to local children. In St Andrews, Silvia Paracchini, a Scot originally from Italy, works with a team of five other EU nationals on ground-breaking neurogenetics, including vital work on dyslexia. That work will benefit us all. Nanodent in Glenrothes and Edinburgh has Spanish and Greek dentists who are plugging a gap in that vital service. My hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) is married to a German Scot who has worked in the NHS in Scotland for 32 years. The former Member of the Scottish Parliament, Christian Allard, is a Scot who was originally from France. He set up a fishing business in the Rosyth area, with 22% of its academic staff and 31% of its research staff coming from other EU countries. That is absolutely critical.

Stephen Gethins (LD): The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point, drawing on his own experience in the Scottish Parliament. That Parliament reflects the modern Scotland, drawing as it does on so many people from across the EU.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Stephen Gethins**: I want to take an intervention from the other side of the House now.

**Stephen Kerr** (Stirling) (Con): Is the hon. Gentleman really insinuating that there is a threat in his mind—I believe that it exists only in his mind—that we are somehow going to remove these valuable members of our society from our nation? That is a preposterous suggestion. It is simply fear-mongering.

**Stephen Gethins**: This is outrageous. If this was scaremongering, the Government would be quite happy to remove the uncertainty from EU citizens, but they have not done so. And what about the 100 EU nationals who received Home Office letters telling them that there had been an unfortunate error? Those letters should have told them, “We are sorry. You are welcome to stay here.”

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Stephen Gethins**: I want to finish making my points now.

The UK is at a crossroads in relation to the kind of country that we want to see. The first mark of that must be the way in which we treat our fellow citizens. Is the message that is coming out that they are bargaining chips? Or is the message that we should be welcoming them? This is a question of fairness, just as it is for the WASPI women. If the UK Government will not keep the promises that were made by Vote Leave and by senior members of this Administration who are in a position to do something about this, they should devolve this power to the Scottish Parliament and the other devolved Administrations.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Stephen Gethins**: I want to finish now, and I am sorry that some Members have not been able to get in.

The day after the EU referendum, the First Minister of Scotland said:

“I want to take the opportunity this morning to speak directly to citizens of other EU countries living here in Scotland—you remain welcome here, Scotland is your home and your contribution is valued.”

Today, we are asking Parliament to use the powers that we have and, as the Brexit Committee has requested, to remove the uncertainty for EU citizens. We can do this today, right now.

5.49 pm

**The Minister for Immigration (Brandon Lewis)**: It is good to have the chance to correct some of the inaccurate things that were stated just a few moments ago, and it was interesting to listen to the Scottish National party spokesman make a speech in which he simply decided not to recognise democracy. There was a referendum in this country, a decision was made and this Government will deliver what the people of the United Kingdom voted for, and we will deliver that in a way that gets a good deal for the United Kingdom.

**Jo Stevens** (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?
Brandon Lewis: Not just yet; I want to make some progress.

We are listening to the SNP trying to play catch-up, and I will explain why they are yet again behind the curve on where we are. It is slightly odd and, I suspect, somewhat disconcerting for many people in Scotland today to listen to their representatives fail to represent the very people in Scotland who elected them, because there was not a single mention of any British citizen or Scottish individual who is living and working in the European Union. It is proper to ensure that we do right by them.

Several hon. Members rose—

Brandon Lewis: I am going to make some progress before taking interventions.

More than 3 million EU citizens currently live in the UK, and the Government have been clear that we value their contribution to our national life, to our economy and to our rich and diverse society. We want them to stay, and there is agreement on that. We want them to stay and we want to deliver that for them.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I thank the Minister for giving way. On the contribution of EU nationals, does it not concern him that there is an 89% drop in nurses and midwives coming from Europe and that 11% of UK-born nurses have fallen off the register? If we cannot recruit nurses and midwives, what will that mean for this country’s health service?

Brandon Lewis: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will have done his homework and will have taken the time to look at the work we are doing on what we do as we leave the EU. The independent experts at the Migration Advisory Committee are doing work to look at what we do post Brexit, but let me be clear that we are still in the EU and still have freedom of movement, which will continue until we leave the EU.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Will the Minister just finish answering the first intervention before taking any more.

At the last calculation, this country’s net migration figure was some 246,000, and roughly half of them were EU nationals, who continue to come to this country. People see the UK as a country to come to, and rightly so. We should continue to be a country that welcomes people and plays that role.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Will the Minister give way on that?

Brandon Lewis: I am going to make some progress, and I will then take some interventions. I am conscious of the limited time available for Back-Bench Members.

The future rights of EU citizens living here is an issue that has an impact on the lives of millions of hard-working people across the country, and it has been the Prime Minister’s first priority in the negotiations to ensure that they can carry on living their lives here as before. I therefore welcome the opportunity to outline that further today. The Government have been making it clear at every opportunity that we want to offer EU citizens living in the UK certainty about their future status as early as possible. We have been clear that no EU citizen currently lawfully in the UK will have to leave when we exit the EU, and hon. Members can play their part by reassuring their constituents of that fact—I am sure that they would not want to mislead anyone any further.

In June, we published a fair and comprehensive offer in respect of the position of EU citizens and their family members in the UK, giving residents who were here before a specified date the opportunity to take UK settled status after completing their qualifying residence period and enabling them to carry on with their lives as before. Family dependants who join a qualifying EU citizen in the UK before the exit date will also be able to apply for UK settled status after five years’ continuous residence—irrespective of the specified date. We have committed to provide an application system that is streamlined and user-friendly. Our intention is to develop a system that draws on existing Government data, such as the employment records held by Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, which will for the majority verify their residence as a worker. Our priority is to minimise the burden of documentary evidence required to prove eligibility under the withdrawal agreement.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I thank the Minister for giving way. Does he agree that every day that passes means another day that EU citizens are living in limbo? I assure him that they are coming to my surgery in big numbers. Every day that passes is important, and the Government need to get on with setting out exactly what settled status means and to design a programme tomorrow.

Brandon Lewis: The hon. Lady should look at what has already been said and at what we have outlined. She should read the Government’s offer, which clearly answers her very point. She has a part to play in reassuring her residents, rather than leaving them wondering about things on which they can have fixed answers.

We have already said that there will be a two-year period after exit for people to make an application, and our caseworkers will be exercising discretion in favour of the applicant, where appropriate, to avoid any unnecessary administrative burdens. For those who already hold an EU permanent residence document, there will be a very simple process to exchange it for a settled status document.

Andy Slaughter: I can tell the Minister what EU citizens think of his proposals because one in six of my constituents is an EU citizen. They think the proposals are bureaucratic and expensive, and that they will deliver second-class citizen status. He should withdraw the proposals and give EU citizens equal status, as they have now. He should do it unilaterally and he should do it now.

Brandon Lewis: I am sure the hon. Gentleman will want to go back, check the details of what we have already outlined on how the process will work and update his residents. They do not have to have those concerns, because what he has just outlined is simply inaccurate.
We have also been very clear that we fully expect the EU and its member states to ensure that the rights of UK nationals living across the EU before the specified date are safeguarded in a reciprocal way. Despite not mentioning it so far this afternoon, I would like to think that Members on both sides of the House will want to do the right thing and ensure that British citizens have their rights protected, too. This issue must therefore be resolved as part of the negotiations on our exit from the EU to ensure the fair treatment of UK nationals living in other EU countries.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): We are not convinced of the Government’s integrity on this point. Earlier this year, I took a petition to the European Parliament arguing for equal rights for EU citizens here in the UK and for British citizens living in the EU. The petition, which also asks for several other things, has gone through three committees of the European Parliament. I remind the Minister that, ultimately, the European Parliament has the power of veto over the negotiations, which he should bear in mind. Many Members of this House have signed these petitions, which are now going through the EU process.

Brandon Lewis: The right hon. Lady makes an interesting contribution, and I therefore hope she will support us in ensuring that all EU citizens here in the UK are aware of exactly what the Government are doing to ensure that they have confidence in being able to stay here.

One million UK nationals have built their lives elsewhere in Europe, and we want to make sure that we get a fair deal both for EU citizens in the UK and for UK nationals in the EU. That is a sensible approach, and it is one we will continue to take in the coming weeks. As I have said, it is notable that we are the party making that point, which I have not heard from Opposition Members in debates on this issue.

We have had detailed and constructive negotiations with the EU on citizens’ rights and, as the Prime Minister outlined, we are within touching distance of an agreement. Around two thirds of the issues identified have now been resolved, and we have isolated the key remaining issues to agree. We will be working hard in the coming days and weeks to finalise this chapter of the withdrawal agreement and to deliver our shared objective of providing swift reassurance to EU citizens in the UK and to UK nationals in the EU. For the UK to take unilateral positions at this stage of the negotiations would not be appropriate or responsible.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The Minister has sought to criticise my hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) for not mentioning UK nationals living in Europe. I know the Minister has met British in Europe, which represents that group, but can he tell us why, if the Government care so much about UK nationals living in Europe, the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union has refused to meet British in Europe despite countless requests to do so?

Brandon Lewis: The hon. and learned Lady will appreciate that, as the Minister responsible for this portfolio, I have met and will continue to meet representatives from that group. The fact remains that there needs to be an agreement between us and the EU, and that agreement must include protecting the status of UK nationals living, working and studying elsewhere in the EU.

The motion calls for the introduction of legislative proposals in this Session to unilaterally safeguard the rights of EU citizens living in the UK. I have just explained why we should not be taking unilateral action on this issue, as it would be wrong for British citizens. The motion is a little late, as the Government have already announced a new Bill to enshrine the withdrawal agreement between the UK and the EU in our domestic law.

Catherine West: What consideration has the Minister or his team given to the case of the 3 million campaign group, which is seeking to examine the fact that when EU nationals arrived under a different treaty they had nothing to do with the Home Office? One of the group’s fears is that the Home Office and its procedures may lead to a complicated procedure, whereas a light touch approach, perhaps from a local authority, may be more appropriate for those who arrived under free movement and with a different set of rights.

Brandon Lewis: The hon. Lady makes a fair point. As she may appreciate, I have met the 3 million and my team continues to meet it, as it is one of the user groups involved in designing the system we will use. As I have said, this system will be streamlined and simple, and it will be designed through working with the very user groups that will be accessing it, to make sure we can grant settled status swiftly, efficiently and effectively.

The withdrawal agreement and implementation Bill will directly implement the contents of the withdrawal agreement, including the agreement on citizens’ rights, in UK law by primary legislation. As I say, this is why the SNP is somewhat behind the curve. This approach will allow Parliamentary scrutiny and oversight of the process, and it will mean that the agreement on citizens’ rights will have direct enforcement and effect in UK law.

Ahead of any primary legislation, we are planning to set up a voluntary application process in 2018, so that EU citizens and their family members who want to get their new UK immigration status at their earliest convenience will be able to do so efficiently, swiftly and effectively.

EU citizens worried about their status here have the Government’s complete assurance that we want them to stay, that we value their presence here, both in our communities and in our economy, and that they continue to be welcome here in the UK. Given that it is in the interests of all parties to protect the rights of their citizens once the UK exits the EU, we are confident that both EU citizens and UK nationals will be protected through a reciprocal arrangement. As I have said, we are now very close to reaching an agreement that will protect EU citizens and UK nationals alike, so any attempt to take unilateral positions would risk undermining our ability to secure protection for the rights of UK nationals living in the EU. When we reach this agreement with the EU, the Government will then enshrine it in primary legislation, providing certainty to the millions of EU citizens who have made the UK their home.

Several hon. Members rose—
Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Before I call the shadow Minister, let me say that there are still a lot of Members wishing to speak and so after the shadow Minister I am going to impose a time limit of three minutes.

6.2 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): The International Trade Secretary told the Tory party conference last year that the Government “would like to be able to give a reassurance to EU nationals in the UK, but that depends on reciprocation by other countries”. He said any other strategy “would be to hand over one of our main cards in the negotiations and doesn’t necessarily make sense at this point”.

That is using the EU nationals here as bargaining chips—that is the Government’s approach. This could have all been resolved quickly if the Government had made a unilateral guarantee of rights, as Labour Members were pushing for, and it would certainly have been reciprocated by the EU. At the start of the negotiations, the EU tabled an offer that opened the doors to a reciprocal arrangement. Had the UK accepted it and worked with the EU on the details, we may have settled.

Instead of providing assurances from day one, the Government made their own offer on EU citizens’ rights. Their so-called settled status offer has been extensively criticised by the 3 million. The Government must urgently improve their offer and stop acting as if this settled status is a settled matter.

The problem with settled status is that the Government seem to think that assimilating EU nationals into our existing immigration system is sufficient. That was the vision set out in the leaked Home Office White Paper, but it is not sufficient. The Government will have to realise quickly that both our non-EEA and EEA immigration systems need a total overhaul. Moreover, although this debate focuses on EU nationals in the UK, let us not forget British citizens living in EU27 countries. Despite the pensioner stereotype, some 80% of them are working, often on a cross-border basis. What are the Government doing to secure their right to freedom of movement and the recognition of their professional qualifications? What assurances can the Minister give today that those rights will be guaranteed before we proceed to phase 2 of the negotiations?

Another problem is the attitude of some Government Members, who seem to imply that EU nationals are lucky to be in this country, rather than acknowledging the value they bring and the contribution they make to our economy and communities, particularly our public services and not least the NHS. There are 58,000 EU nationals working in NHS hospitals and community health services in England alone.

Suella Fernandes: The Prime Minister has said clearly, “we want you to stay” and that we value their commitment. What part of that does the hon. Gentleman not understand?

Afzal Khan: It is clear that things are still confusing for everyone. What part of this does the hon. Lady not understand—that we need to give a simple offer so that we can move on?

In total, there are 2.4 million EU migrants working in the UK, and a far greater proportion of them are in work than of the population as a whole. They make a huge contribution. What they desperately need now is certainty before the conclusion of phase 1 of the talks. This is what the hon. Lady needs to understand: we need certainty for EU citizens in the UK, for UK citizens in the EU and for the businesses and communities in which they have built their lives. The Government have provided none, as they are still busy negotiating with themselves.

It seems to be an alien concept to the Government, but citizens have rights. EU nationals came here in good faith when their rights were guaranteed under freedom of movement rules. Rather than guaranteeing those rights, the Government are offering them the opportunity to reapply for them, charging them for the privilege, and then pretending that nothing much has changed. That is transparently false. No wonder the EU negotiators seem to believe that the Government are incompetent. The Opposition value EU nationals: it is high time that the Government did, too, and followed up their warm words with action.

6.8 pm

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): My constituency of Banff and Buchan voted to leave the EU—

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP) indicated dissent.

David Duguid: That is according to University of East Anglia analysis; look it up. The constituency voted to leave, but it was not because the local people are hostile to immigrants. Indeed, immigrants from inside and outside the European Union are welcome and valued contributors to our community. There is no doubt that EU citizens make a great contribution to the economy of Banff and Buchan. One of our key local industries, food manufacturing and processing, has the highest proportion of workers from the EU of any UK sector, with 33% of its labour consisting of EU nationals. Throughout the UK, the industry employs 120,000 people.
Although many EU nationals choose to make their permanent home in Banff and Buchan, many choose to stay for a time to work and then move on. That creates a constant demand for more workers, especially when factors such as poor infrastructure, particularly poor broadband infrastructure, sadly drive many local young people out of the area.

I am sure that it will come as no surprise to the House that one of the chief reasons why my constituents decided to vote leave was the impact of the EU common fisheries policy on our local fishing industry. Leaving the European Union and the common fisheries policy will mean leaving the single market and putting an end to the free movement of labour.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP) rose—

David Duguid: I cannot give way, I am sorry.

The prospect of needing more immigration in the area because we have more fish than we can catch and process is a welcome one. However, it is clear that there is a real need to develop our local workforce in the long term. That includes not only our own home-grown workforce, but the EU citizens and their children who have made their home here. That can be done outside the EU, as taking back control over immigration does not mean an end to immigration, nor should it. Bearing in mind the great contribution of EU nationals, and as someone who has an international family of my own—my wife is from Azerbaijan—I am, like the Prime Minister and the UK Government, in favour of guaranteeing the rights of EU citizens already living in the UK. It is right that we provide protection and reassurance to families and businesses as quickly as we can. However, that must work both ways, and what we are debating today is the idea of unilaterally granting rights without securing those same rights for British citizens abroad. I agree with SNP Members that Europeans who have made their home in Scotland are indeed very welcome, but the same must be true for Scots who have made their homes in Europe.

What we are doing in leaving the EU is not a game, and the question of rights after Brexit affects millions of people—not just EU citizens in the UK, but UK citizens in the EU. It is very disappointing to see the Scottish National party—a party that claims to stand for the rights of EU nationals, and as taking back control over immigration does not mean an end to immigration, nor should it. Bearing in mind the great contribution of EU nationals, and as someone who has an international family of my own—my wife is from Azerbaijan—I am, like the Prime Minister and the UK Government, in favour of guaranteeing the rights of EU citizens already living in the UK. It is right that we provide protection and reassurance to families and businesses as quickly as we can. However, that must work both ways, and what we are debating today is the idea of unilaterally granting rights without securing those same rights for British citizens abroad. I agree with SNP Members that Europeans who have made their home in Scotland are indeed very welcome, but the same must be true for Scots who have made their homes in Europe.

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Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order.

6.11 pm

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) that it is an absolute disgrace that, 18 months after the referendum, our highly valued EU citizens in the EU last. Neither EU nor UK citizens should be used as bargaining chips—

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): It is with some sadness that I rise to speak in this debate, because my constituency has received proportionally more migrants from eastern Europe than anywhere else in the country. Of all places, Boston and Skegness knows the value that people from Poland, Latvia, Lithuania and elsewhere bring to our local economy. Today we have heard a great deal about surgeries being flooded with people worried about their livelihoods. If I may be blunt, surgeries may be flooded if Members scaremonger and tell people that they might not be welcome here. Being prepared to weaponise the lives and livelihoods of people who have come to this country in good faith, and who the Prime Minister has said are welcome to stay, is not good politics or good democracy. Frankly, it is shameful conduct over a genuinely important matter for constituents on the part of people with other political motives.
Government Members have a responsibility, which we are prepared to take up, to reassure people who are genuinely concerned about their future in this country. We have already heard from the Government Front Bench—from not only the Prime Minister but a number of members of the Government—a solid and sensible pitch that we want people to stay. People who have asked for EU nationals to leave do not represent the mainstream of Brexit voters, and they do not represent a large number of people. In my constituency, the only people who ask for “foreigners to go home”, as it is often put, are either those who seek to misrepresent the views of Brexit voters or those who have their own nakedly racist proposition. Neither position represents the views of the Conservative party. We in politics have a duty to reassure our constituents. I know that the small number of people—I mean less than 10—who have come to my surgery seeking reassurance have received just that. They have gone away knowing that this Government seek to provide them with what they need.

I will end by asking, what can Members of this House do? Well, we can do things such as invite the Polish ambassador to our constituency, as I have done. We can stand on a platform with him and say, “This Government welcome the contribution of EU nationals. We want you to stay, and we will deliver that deal as best we can.”

6.17 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Do not the unintended consequences of the decision to leave the EU seem to be appearing thick and fast? The implications of restrictions on EU nationals seem to be among the most unexpected, for some folks at least.

There has been some talk of scaremongering today, so let us hear the case of my constituent, Françoise Milne. She is French and has lived in the UK—mainly in Scotland—for 24 years. She has been married to a Scot for those 24 years and they have three children together. She has been refused a residency card for not exercising her treaty rights. She maintained the family home and reared three children while her husband served in the Marines, including on tours of duty in Bosnia and in Northern Ireland. He spent more than two decades in service and rose to the rank of lieutenant colonel. He is a member of the Honourable Corps of Gentlemen at Arms, which is perhaps more commonly known as the Queen’s Bodyguard. The Home Office says that his wife cannot prove that she can support herself. Her husband’s income and her smaller income together provide for the matrimonial home and family life. The love and support she has provided for her husband helped him in his service. The idea that she not been exercising her treaty rights is ludicrous. I have written to Ministers and await an answer, but hers is not the only case that I have been asked to help with.

Marco Truffelli moved from Italy to London as a young man nearly 30 years ago. He built a career in the tourism industry, including as chief executive of VisitScotland for five years. His international management company has prestigious clients and he brings wealth into the UK, but his application for citizenship was refused on the grounds that he could not prove that he was resident in the UK. That was despite providing the receipts from HMRC that the Home Office asked for as proof of residence.

Mr Truffelli is married to a Scotswoman and has three children here. He never thought he would need to prove he had a right to live here. He applied for citizenship following the referendum. If Mr Truffelli does not match the profile of EU citizens this Government will accept, who can? I have also written to Ministers about Mr Truffelli’s case.

Those are just two examples. There are many people with different stories to tell, but a common thread among the constituents coming to see me—and, I imagine, a whole lot of other Members—is the fear that people have: fear that they will no longer be welcome in their home, and that a bureaucratic decision will see them sent away from their family or left without a secure right to stay here. I have constituents who are living in fear of the state. Members should consider that: a modern state—a supposed democracy—where people live in fear of its actions.

All these people, who are making our communities better places to live, are swinging in the wind because this Government are in thrall to a xenophobic wing of the Conservative party and a right-wing, anti-foreigner media. That is ironic for a party stuffed with people who are proud of their ancestry—the Angles, the Saxons and the Normans, that is.

6.20 pm

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): And also the Dutch, in my case, but I will move swiftly on.

I welcome this debate and the chance to highlight the Government’s commitment to this issue. I welcome the Minister’s statement that we are close to an agreement, and I agree with him that the Prime Minister has worked hard to make sure we are in the right place on this issue. However, I mostly welcome the chance to thank people for the contribution they make when they come to this country and work. They work in industries of which we can be proud. They lead on science in our universities, and in our building industry and our NHS.

Why on earth would we not want to encourage and promote their security? What we have been shown is the complete lack of understanding of what a negotiation is by the hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins).

Stephen Gethins: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Jo Churchill: I have three minutes; the hon. Gentleman had considerably more.

One of the points the hon. Gentleman made was that the husband of the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford)—he is a German—has worked long and hard in the NHS. However, the hon. Gentleman showed no care for those British people who might be working abroad, and that is what the negotiation is about.

On the progress that has been made to date, of the 60 aspects we have been discussing, we are on target with 37. The UK has done more than the EU27 countries to bring the process to where it currently is, as is widely recognised. We have reached a crucial moment in the negotiations, and it is important that the processes the Minister spoke about are seamless and that they happen. HMRC will certainly have a part to play, although I
would like to understand a little more whether it is the right body to take things forward, because it is not always as fluid an operation as we would like.

There is still progress to be made on this deal—on citizens, the direction of talks, the structure of negotiations and the UK’s future more broadly. Jobs have a crucial part to play in that, and we do not want to destroy the brilliant economy we have, which encourages people into this country.

We need to look after not only the 3 million EU citizens we have, but the 1.2 million of our citizens abroad. That is what we will do, because it is right. It is clear that the negotiations are at a crucial stage, and we must ensure not only that we unstick them and get the best deal for everybody involved, but that we in this House do not behave impatiently with arrogance, or in a way that would critically endanger those people.

6.23 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Living with uncertainty in our life brings a lot of stress, and we have seen a stunning lack of empathy, exemplified by the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman), about what people are going through.

As my hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) pointed out, we have all been helped by, treated by, served by and supported by EU nationals, and we all probably have good reasons to be grateful to them. To us in the highlands, they are our friends, our neighbours and our colleagues. They happen to come from other parts of Europe. This uncertainty visited upon them is no way to treat our friends, without whom businesses in the highlands face the danger of scaling down and even having difficulties functioning. From cradle to grave, they make a positive impact on Scotland, especially in the highlands, where population growth is essential.

Without inward migration, there will be more older people—incidentally, Mr Deputy Speaker, there is nothing wrong with older people; I have harboured a lifelong ambition to become one and I am making good progress—and a greater need for pensions and healthcare than can be met by their own contributions. We must not forget that older people did their bit when they were younger.

Free of Brexit, it was projected that 90% of Scotland’s population growth over the next 10 years would come from migration, especially in the highlands. It is a cold fact that without migrants, we have more deaths than births. Some 30% of the highlands and islands population live in very remote areas. We need people to help them. The fact that young people are leaving means that we need EU nationals and their families in the highlands.

EU nationals support our health service. Six per cent. of NHS clinicians in Scotland are EU citizens and the figure is higher in the rest of the UK. We have already estimated that we cannot recruit all the regulated staff—doctors and nurses—for hospitals and surgeries to fulfill our future need. As was pointed out earlier, the Royal College of Nursing has seen applications from EU nationals collapse by 96%. Coping with an ageing population is looking incredibly difficult. In the care sector, a survey of Camphill communities pointed out that 170 out of their 251 staff working with people with learning difficulties were EU nationals, with only five UK citizens.

The same is true of the food and drink, tourism and construction industries. As we heard just this morning, an unprecedented alliance of seven of the construction industry’s major bodies has come together to talk about the industry facing a cliff edge over EU workers and an inability to deliver infrastructure. The National Federation of Builders and others have said that this is a disaster.

We need EU nationals across the UK, but especially in Scotland and absolutely desperately in the highlands.

6.26 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): EU nationals living in the United Kingdom form an integral part of the economic, cultural and social fabric of this country. I should declare an interest, as I am married to one. My wife hails from Stockholm. Therefore, it is no surprise that I am very supportive of the principle that it should be business as usual for EU nationals, even if only to have a quiet home life. That is the right thing to do.

We have always been an open, attractive and welcoming country. As Ruth Davidson said at the Conservative party conference in 2016: “for those who have already chosen to build a life, open a business, make a contribution, I say this is your home, and you are welcome here.”

I associate myself fully and unreservedly with those comments. The Conservative party has ever stood with those who, as John Major said, have the “guts and drive” to travel to another country thousands of miles away to work to better themselves and improve the lot of their families. After all, those are innately Conservative instincts.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andrew Bowie: I will not, given the time.

The Prime Minister has explicitly confirmed that the United Kingdom does not want anyone who is living legally in the UK to be asked to leave because of our exit from the European Union. It is every bit our desired outcome that it will be possible for EU citizens who are already here to be treated just the same as if they were British subjects. No EU national will be treated as a second-class citizen.

The SNP’s scaremongering on this issue is utterly shameful. Putting fear into the hearts of EU nationals by making false claims about their future in this country is an utter disgrace, and SNP Members should be ashamed. They know full well that negotiations on the bilateral agreement have been going on from the very start of the Brexit process. It was one of the first issues that our negotiators sought to resolve. The Government have made it explicit that they do not want to use EU citizens’ future rights as a bargaining chip, but they cannot risk allowing the future of UK citizens in the EU to become a bargaining chip either.

We are making progress. As recently as October, the Prime Minister wrote in an open letter that the UK Government and our partners in Brussels were “in touching distance” of a deal on citizens’ rights. Nothing
from any other European leader has contradicted that, and Michel Barnier has agreed that an agreement is close. The SNP wants somehow to unilaterally grant rights to one side, just at the point when we are so close to agreeing an arrangement that guarantees the rights of everyone. That is total madness.

EU nationals are welcome and will always be welcome in the United Kingdom, but I urge SNP Members to think very carefully about how seriously their motion would jeopardise the chances of their Scottish constituents enjoying similar rights in the rest of the European Union.

6.29 pm

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): I rise to represent East Lothian, an agricultural constituency that relies heavily on EU workers at certain times of the year. The constituency relies on EU workers for our care services, and it houses a great many EU citizens who work in the university sector, in our own Queen Margaret University.

We have historically had very close relationships with Europe, especially with Italy. I am thinking about the families, who still live in our community, who moved to my constituency in the 19th century from Barga, in Tuscany, when there was an economic problem. Sixty per cent. of the people who live in Barga, a town with 10,000 residents, can say that they have Scottish relatives, many of whom live in Musselburgh, Tranent, Port Seton and Cockenzie.

There is a lack of confidence among EU citizens about the Government’s intentions, and I hear a lot of cries across the Chamber. Perhaps it is for the Government to clarify their position more succinctly and definitely. I raise the example that I have set out because the connections that exist are deep. Is it too much to ask that our neighbours, friends and workers have their rights secured and understand what those rights will be?

6.30 pm

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): Britain is undoubtedly one of the most open, tolerant and welcoming countries on earth. EU citizens have benefited our economy and our society hugely over the last few years, and they have brought a great diversity to our towns, cities and rural communities. Despite the fall in value of the pound and the negative headlines that have appeared since almost the day after the Brexit vote, the net migration figure of close to a quarter of a million is testament to what a great country this still is, not just to visit, but in which to work and make one’s home. People really value that, as I hear from my constituents and EU nationals who come to talk to me about the matter.

That is probably why even before article 50 was triggered, the Prime Minister said that we wanted to deal with the rights of EU nationals at the very earliest opportunity. I remind the House that the EU stated that that would not be dealt with until after we had triggered article 50. The EU left people in a state of limbo during the months in which we waited to commence negotiations. I welcome the fact that we are “in touching distance” of reaching an agreement on the matter, but, as someone who supported remain in the referendum, I was deeply disappointed with the EU’s initial approach.

To do as the motion suggests now—when we are, as my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) pointed out a moment ago, within touching distance of reaching agreement in the negotiations—would be a gross error for the 1.2 million people from this country who are making their lives overseas. If anyone thinks that we can do that and everything will be all right, they need to think about some of the negotiating positions that the EU and its member states have taken.

Let me just talk about one EU member state, Spain. Right from the start, Spain linked this issue to sovereignty over Gibraltar. I remind the House that we have just witnessed an event in Catalonia that shows a great deal of bad grace and bad faith on Spain’s part. What are we supposed to do? On this point, are we supposed to hand over absolutely everything, effectively allowing the EU and its member states to take unilateral action or to threaten and say whatever they want? That would be a grave negotiating error.

6.33 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): We have heard a lot from Government Members about EU citizens being valued and welcome, but words are cheap in that regard. I go out and speak to EU citizens every weekend. More often than not, when I knock on doors I will meet an EU citizen, because they are fully integrated into the community and so they are often the partners, husbands, wives or flatmates of British citizens. I am talking not about what I say to them, but about what they say to me. They are genuinely distressed and upset, and they feel as though they are being treated as second-class citizens. That is not just because of the failure to grant or promise them rights, but because of what they are being offered.

The most recent document is the so-called technical note. That is a disingenuous phrase, because the document is a policy statement that gives EU citizens rights that are less than they would otherwise have. We do not know yet whether that will be the final version. The fact remains that there will have to be an application process, and there will be a fee. That applies even to those who have permanent residence already. There will be requirements on such citizens that are more onerous than the ones they currently have to meet. All of that sends out the signal that they will not have a status equal to what they have at the moment, but will have second-class status.

The Government should accept—I cannot better what the 3 million group has said in response to the technical note—that such people want the same rights as now, and they should be granted that without having to pay a fee and without having to go through a long and bureaucratic process. If the Government do not accept that, the signal they are sending out to EU nationals in this country is they are not as welcome as they should be.

People are already voting with their feel. They are not going to make decisions in a year’s time; they are making them now. These are often talented people who could work elsewhere, and if the Government wish them to leave the country and work elsewhere, they should at least be up front about that. They are suggesting, through the backdoor, that EU citizens currently resident
in this country are not going to have the same rights and will not be treated on the same basis, but will have to go through identity checks and residence checks in order to stay in this country. Voters should not be put up with such a change of attitude and such a change of status?

The Minister should be able to say in response to the motion, first, that there will be a unilateral decision, and secondly, that that decision will be for a status that is exactly equal to what residents have now. If she cannot do that, all the words that Ministers have said will carry no weight, and we will see that they are placing less value on EU citizens than they have now.

6.36 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I am proud to live in a country where fundamental decency and neighbourliness lead us to welcome newcomers and embrace them as our own. There is something inspiring about our warm embrace of citizens from all over the world. It is often said that tolerance is one of the British virtues, but I believe it goes beyond that: it goes beyond tolerance to a warm acceptance and a sense of celebration about our diversity.

We should be gratified that so many people from around the world chose to make the United Kingdom their home, and they make a full contribution to the society they live in. They are an economic positive; indeed, an economic necessity—students, entrepreneurs, skilled workers and valued employees. Before my election to this place, I had the privilege to work alongside and lead teams of wonderful colleagues from across the EU—talented, motivated and inspiring people—who had chosen to come to the United Kingdom and build their future lives here. Every one of those wonderful people, my former colleagues, should, in common with all other EU nationals living and working in our country, be assured of their position in our society, which is as much theirs as it is mine.

That is why the priority, first and foremost, of Her Majesty’s Government in our negotiations with the EU was, from the very outset, to secure the status of EU citizens living in the United Kingdom and that of British nationals living in the EU. This debate is somewhat redundant because we have received assurances, as we did again from the Minister today, that we are “within touching distance” of an agreement to safeguard these rights.

SNP Members have brought forward this issue for debate—they do so with alarming frequency—because every time they do they try to tell people, despite a thousand assurances to the contrary, that their right to stay in this country is somehow at risk. No EU national currently living in the UK lawfully should have any fear, whatever the scaremongers on the SNP Benches may say, about having to leave the United Kingdom when our country leaves the EU.

SNP Members spread fear and panic because they think there is some party political advantage in doing so, but fear and panic are entirely unjustified. Their implication that Conservative Members are somehow plotting to ship back our friends, our neighbours, our work colleagues, our partners and our families to the country they came from is absurd, but it is an absurd narrative that they delight in because absurdity is their speciality.

Whatever spin SNP Members try to put on this situation, the fact is that the people of Britain—the family of nations and regions that make up our United Kingdom—voted to leave the European Union. EU nationals are welcome in this country, and will continue to be welcome here. Frankly, I do not think that the British people who have EU nationals as friends, family, neighbours, colleagues and partners would stand for any other policy, and it is disreputable of SNP Members to suggest that they would. I am happy that this House should take a lead from our neighbours and our friends, as well as from our EU nationals, who are under no threat whatsoever from this Government.

6.39 pm

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I am prepared to accept the Government’s stated position that they will ensure that many EU citizens living here will stay after this negotiation. I am sure that that is the case. However, I hope that the Minister will have the frankness and honesty to accept the facts and figures that show that many EU nationals have already left since the referendum, which is damaging many aspects of our society and economy.

Brandon Lewis: That is wrong.

Sir Edward Davey: It is not wrong. I have shown the figures to the Minister. I have talked to businesses and to the local hospital in Kingston, and they are all worried about recruitment and people having gone home.

Brandon Lewis: The simple fact is that net migration was 246,000 last year. The figures are up for EU nationals coming to this country.

Sir Edward Davey: I am afraid that those figures show what has happened in the past. If the Minister talked to businesses and to people working in the health service, he would know that the position is changing significantly and quickly. He is in a completely ridiculous world if he thinks that that is not the case.

I want to challenge the Minister. If he is going to welcome EU nationals, he and his colleagues need to do various things. Italian and German nationals, and other friends and colleagues, have shown some of us job adverts saying that only British passport holders can apply. Will he ensure that the full weight of the law will go against those putting out those adverts, because they are illegal? We need to make sure that that discrimination, which is appearing in our society, is clamped down on. I hope he will give that reassurance from the Dispatch Box and tell us what measures he and his colleagues will take to prevent that discrimination, which is affecting EU nationals here and making them feel unwelcome.

Will the Minister say more—the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) talked about this—about whether the systems that will be put in place will be easy and welcoming, not difficult and expensive? I have a concrete case for him. An EU national with permanent residency in the UK applied and paid for it. The Government—wrongly, in my view—are asking them to apply again for settled status. Given that they have already paid for permanent residency, will the Minister commit from the Dispatch Box that they will not be charged for having to apply again for settled status?
If an EU national who has not been able to provide proof of residency is given temporary status for two years—a new Government proposal for which the EU national will have to pay—will they have to pay again when they apply for settled status after five years? I hope that the Minister will make it clear that they will not have to do so.

I hope that the Minister will also make it clear that the whole registration process will be simple. He said that in his speech, but will he take up the idea suggested by the 3 million group that, in order to register, people should just have to prove that they have lived here for the past five years and have proof of identity? That would make it simple, quick and unbureaucratic. I hope that he will commit to that from the Dispatch Box tonight.

I hope that the Minister will reassure people about how the negotiations on family reunion are going. This is one of the sticking points about which the 3 million group is most worried, because its members see the UK Government taking away rights that they thought they had in the past and preventing them from bringing their relatives here. The group has set out its views in detail.

I believe that the UK’s settled status proposal is not fit for purpose and should be rejected. It has set out in its contribution to the debate that he will commit to that from the Dispatch Box. I hope that he will take up the idea suggested by the 3 million group that, in order to register, people should just have to prove that they have lived here for the past five years and have proof of identity? That would make it simple, quick and unbureaucratic. I hope that he will commit to that from the Dispatch Box tonight.

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We have heard it said that we cannot give unilateral guarantees because that would prejudice the position of the 3 million UK citizens living in the other EU countries. If they had bothered to read the report—certainly if the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), who described the recommendation as “total madness”, had bothered to read it—they would have seen that the recommendation was unanimous and that the Committee, before the last general election, contained a majority of Conservative MPs. Madness! They might even have recognised the names of some of those responsible for that unanimous act of madness, because one is now the Environment Secretary and one is the Justice Secretary. If he wants to tell them they are mad, I think that he can say “bye bye” to his political career, almost before it has started.

British citizens living abroad want the House to agree the motion tonight, because they believe that it is in their best interest that the UK make the first move, but I will finish with one final point. When the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) used the phrase “bargaining chips”, which came from Ministers initially, not from us, there were howls of protest. What do we call it when Ministers say, “We cannot do A, although we’d like to, because if we do A, it makes it less likely that these people will do B, which we want them to do.” That is called a negotiating tactic. And what do we call A and B in the standard parlance of negotiation? We call them “negotiating capital” or “bargaining chips”. They might not like it, but that is the language of their own International Trade Secretary.

If the Government refuse to accept the motion, or to act on it when it is passed, because they want to use the uncertainty they are creating in the minds of EU nationals here to try to get certainty in the minds of UK nationals living abroad, not only are they going against the unanimous views of a group that included a lot of their own MPs, including two Ministers, and not only are they undermining the wish of the 3 million people living on mainland Europe, but they are continuing to use all 4.5 million as bargaining chips. They do not like to hear that, but the only way they can stop the phrase being true is to stop treating them as bargaining chips and give the unilateral guarantees that the 1.5 million here and the 3 million over there so desperately want to hear.

6.52 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): I thank right hon. and hon. Members across the House who have participated in this debate on the very important issue of safeguarding the rights of EU citizens living here in the UK and those of UK citizens living in the EU after our withdrawal. I am glad that Parliament has had the chance to debate this issue again, and I hope we can reach some clarity at the end of it. I have heard many SNP Members describe the worries and concerns of their constituents and the alleged uncertainty people feel they are living under. May I please take this opportunity to clarify the situation? I hope then that SNP Members, who are clearly concerned about their constituents, will do the responsible thing and, the next time a constituent comes into one of their surgeries with these concerns, reiterate the Government’s position.

The Government’s position is as follows. [Interruption.] I would be grateful if SNP Members gave me a moment to say this so that they—and their constituents, should they be watching—might understand the Government’s position. Those EU citizens and their family members who are worried about their status here have the Government’s complete assurance that we want them to stay and that they continue to be welcome in the United Kingdom. I ask that that position be clarified when constituents go to hon. Members’ surgeries, because I fear that that misunderstanding, which some of them are labouring under, might be contributing to their concerns.

Stephen Gethins rose—

Victoria Atkins: I will take just one intervention, because I am conscious of time.

Stephen Gethins: I think the Minister needs to understand that those points were raised in response to letters that constituents had received from the Government.

Victoria Atkins: I know that individual cases were raised, and I hope very much that those letters are being chased up if no replies have as yet been received. I also hope that, now that Members have heard the assurances given from the Dispatch Box today, they will communicate those assurances to their constituents while they await responses from the Home Office.

I have another clarification for the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey). The discrimination in job advertisements that he described is wrong, and I can reassure him that the Government will continue to crack down on any such discrimination.

We heard today from my hon. Friends the Members for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid), for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), for Solihull (Julian Knight), for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) and for Gordon (Colin Clark), all of whom represented the views of their constituents, and some of whose constituencies voted to leave. However, I must make a special mention of my hon. Friend, and Lincolnshire neighbour, the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman), who has the honour of representing a constituency with one of the largest eastern European populations in the country. He set out very robustly the views of his constituents, not only those who are “yellowbellies” born and bred, but those who have had the good sense to move to his constituency from the European Union.

Since the result of the referendum last summer, the Government have made absolutely clear how important it is for us to secure the status of EU citizens here as soon as possible. As the Prime Minister said in her open letter to them, that is her first priority in the negotiations. The right to settled status will be defined in the withdrawal agreement, which will be implemented in United Kingdom legislation.

In respect of the negotiations, the Government wish to offer an assurance that we are close to reaching an agreement on citizens’ rights. There remain only a small number of outstanding issues to be agreed with our European partners. In the coming weeks, the focus will be on delivering an agreement that works for EU citizens living here and for UK nationals living in the EU. The fact remains, however, that there must be an agreement with the EU on this matter. We cannot just wish it away. Taking unilateral positions at this vital stage in the negotiations would risk the position of UK nationals.
who have also chosen to build their lives with their families in other countries. It would not be responsible for the Government to ignore them and enter into the unilateral agreements that have been urged on us by the Scottish nationalists.

The Government wish to reassure EU citizens throughout the United Kingdom that we are confident of reaching a deal that will enable them to carry on with their lives as before. As the Prime Minister has made clear, no EU citizen living lawfully in the UK will be required to leave when the UK withdraws from the EU. We recognise and value the huge contribution that EU citizens make to our economy, our health service, our schools, our care sector and our communities. We will act fairly towards them, just as we expect other EU countries to act fairly towards UK nationals living there. Safeguarding the rights of citizens is a shared priority for both sides in these negotiations, and a reciprocal agreement that works for all our citizens is now within touching distance.

**Question put and agreed to.**

**Resolved,**

That this House calls on the Home Secretary to introduce legislative proposals in this Session of Parliament, in line with the recommendation in paragraph 45 of the Second Report of the Exiting the European Union Committee of Session 2016-17, The Government’s negotiating objectives: the rights of UK and EU citizens, HC 1071, that the Government should now make a unilateral decision to safeguard the rights of EU nationals living in the UK.

**Stephen Gethins:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. May I seek your guidance? This House has now agreed that there should be a unilateral decision to safeguard the rights of EU nationals. How can we instruct the Home Secretary, and when she will come before the House to deliver this?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** The instruction has been given earlier, but I will repeat it for the record, to make sure that we are all aware. The Leader of the House of Commons made it clear that “the Government are determined to listen and take account of views from all sides of the House. Where there is opportunity for the Government to listen and better enable the effective work of Parliament, we will do so.

To that end, I am today updating the House on the Government’s approach to Opposition day debates. Where a motion tabled by an Opposition party has been approved by the House, the relevant Minister will respond to the resolution of the House by making a statement no more than 12 weeks after the debate. This is to allow thoughtful consideration of the points that have been raised, facilitate collective discussion across Government, especially on cross-cutting issues, and to outline any actions that have been taken.

This is in line with suggestions made by Members across the House and I hope colleagues will welcome the new initiative and the opportunity for accountability this provides.”—[Official Report, 26 October 2017; Vol. 630, c. 12WS.]

**Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Given that sensible explanation from the Leader of the House, will that now be known as the “Leadsom principle”?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I think the hon. Gentleman has just named it.

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### Universal Credit: Terminally Ill People

**Motion made, and Question proposed,** That this House do now adjourn.—(Mike Freer.)

7.2 pm

**Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I have raised many times in this place the subject of universal credit and the problems faced by my constituents and others across the nations of the UK. This debate is about UC and its effect on the terminally ill, and preparing for it has been one of the most humbling experiences of my parliamentary career so far. I pay special tribute to Marie Curie, the highland Macmillan-Citizens Advice partnership and the Motor Neurone Disease Association for their input, and especially to terminally ill claimants who have come forward with stories of the issues they face—stories of delays, difficulties, the deficits they face as disabled people, the complexities and frustrations that confront them, and the humiliations and indignities they have to suffer.

These are actually very simple things for the Government to fix, some of them at little or no cost to them. If the Chancellor is sincere in what he said in the Budget debate about wanting a civilised and tolerant place that cares for the vulnerable, he will take on board the representations I am making on behalf of those agencies and the terminally ill tonight.

**Neil Gray** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate and commend him on the work he has done over many years in highlighting the problems with UC. He mentioned the Chancellor’s Budget, which was an admission that UC was failing some of the people he mentions. Does he agree that the Chancellor and the Government now need to go further to address the real issues at the heart of UC, such as those he mentions tonight?

**Drew Hendry:** Absolutely. We have all accepted the principle of a simpler benefit and the move to a single payment, but that simplification does not work if it is not simple for the users and instead becomes complex and difficult, which is what has happened.

As my hon. Friend points out, I have been raising issues with UC since 2013 when I was leader of the Highland Council, where we took UC through the pilot and on to live service and finally full service roll-out. During that time we spotted and reported the problems thrown up by UC, but until very recent weeks none of them have been taken on board. As my hon. Friend notes, we have recently seen an admission, however grudging, from the Government that there are problems—that the current system is broken. The Minister has an opportunity tonight to fix some of the areas in which it is broken.

Prior to universal credit being introduced, personal independence payment had a specified line for those who were terminally ill to call. Claimants on PIP who were terminally ill had their payments processed quickly, payments could be made weekly and implicit consent was available; giving supporting organisations the authority to make claims on behalf of terminally ill claimants. Many terminally ill people simply do not want to be told that they are dying, and PIP allowed them some consideration and dignity.
Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving me permission to intervene on him and for bringing this matter to the House for our consideration. Does he agree that, just as disability living allowance had special rules for the terminally ill, universal credit must have compassionate grounds so that it can be adapted to an individual’s circumstances? Each person has circumstances that are specific to themselves.

Drew Hendry: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that point, and I will underline it later in my speech.

I held a universal credit summit in my constituency, specifically to challenge the accusations of scaremongering that were coming from the Government Benches. I invited every Tory MP, along with Ministers and indeed the Prime Minister, to come to Inverness to hear testimony from agencies and claimants about the problems of universal credit. Had they attended, they would have heard from Elaine Donnelly, the caseworker at the highland Macmillan-Citizens Advice partnership. She has been dealing with the universal credit cases of cancer patients and the terminally ill. She describes herself as “battle-weary” and “numb” as a result of the number and type of claims that are coming forward and the fact that people are dying before their claims are processed. She told us about a claimant who was dying of cancer not knowing the outcome of her claim and being without any support for six weeks. I welcome the timely reduction of the waiting period to 5 weeks, by the way. It took her three months to get her payment, and when it came through it was wrong. A £500 deduction had been made for another benefit that had never been claimed or received.

Other claimants have included Lucy, a 22-year-old who had missed the deadline, which meant that her PIP and her mobility component were stopped. Her blue badge was lost and her mum’s carer’s allowance was taken away. It was hard work to sort that out. In another case, Jo-Ann’s dad was told in April 2016 that there was nothing more the doctors could do, and he was moved from DLA to PIP that summer. He received two points—eight points are needed for the standard rate and 12 for the enhanced rate. The rules on terminal illness suggested that if the probability was that dying could be expected within six months, the claimant could apply under the special rules. However, the prognosis was unknown. The doctors were saying that it could be a month or a year, and it was unclear whether those rules would be an option, as the doctors could not reasonably say whether death would be likely within six months. Let us just imagine that discussion.

Jo-Ann’s dad and the family had not come to terms with the prognosis, so they could not claim under the special rules. The process was incredibly difficult and caused a lot of stress. As the special rules option was not available, the application had to be followed in the usual way and PIP was not awarded. The mobility car was taken away, leaving Jo-Ann’s dad unable to attend medical appointments or get shopping, due to their rural location, which had no bus services.

Jo-Ann also sat in with her dad, John, at the face-to-face assessment. She described the experience as “awful”, saying:

“They pushed and pushed my dad until he gave them the answer they wanted.”

When he was asked if he could walk 50 yards, he said no, so he was then asked if he could do it even if it took a long time. When he again said no, he was asked if he could do it if there was an emergency and he had already had to walk 50 yards. At that point, he felt so pressurised that he said yes. The overview of the assessment then said that he could “reasonably” walk 50 yards. The assessment process is deeply humiliating and degrading, putting claimants in a position where they often feel bad about not being able to carry out certain tasks and even about asking for extra assistance in the form of benefits.

I hope that no one here or watching the debate ever faces a diagnosis of cancer, motor neurone disease or any other terminal illness, yet that happens to people every day. It must be absolutely shattering not only for those who are diagnosed, but for their families. I imagine that the last thing on their minds would be going through the hoops to get the basic financial support that they need, yet that is what universal credit means in its current form.

I mentioned the Motor Neurone Disease Association, which states that MND is a devastating fatal disease that rapidly progresses through the brain and central nervous system, leaving people trapped in a failing body and unable to move, walk, talk, swallow or, eventually, breathe. It kills one third of people within the first year and more than half within two years. A small number survive longer. People with MND and other terminal illnesses and their families face significant financial burdens, with an estimated extra cost of £12,000 a year.

Universal credit needs to work smoothly for the terminally ill, but it does not, and there is nothing like it for causing stress. People do not need and should not suffer delays or stress, and a financial burden is the last thing that they should be asked to face. Universal credit should be easy, but not everyone can use the online portal. Many are simply unable to type. Completing an online application has been described by those who assist the terminally ill as “extremely arduous and time consuming, often requiring outside help”, yet help is available only over the telephone, which is clearly inappropriate for anyone who is unable to speak.

The severe disability premium has been abolished under universal credit, costing disabled adults with no carer £62.45 a week or £3,250 a year. The enhanced disability premium was also abolished, costing disabled adults under the pension age £15.90 a week. The Department for Work and Pensions’ stipulation that terminally ill claimants can apply only via special rules if death can be reasonably expected within six months does not work for many people with terminal illnesses. Health professionals are often confused by that condition and about whether they should sign the relevant form, which is known as a DS1500, meaning that people often do not get the swift support that they badly need. Whether people apply under the special rules or not, there is no customer journey specific to claimants with disabilities or vulnerabilities, especially the terminally ill. Those with severe and progressive conditions, including terminal illnesses, are all given work-focused interviews, which is clearly insensitive. As I mentioned earlier, some people do not want their doctor to tell them that they are dying, and it is cruel to ask them to self-certify their fate—cruel and unnecessary.
[Drew Hendry]

In conclusion, I have some simple low-cost or no-cost requests of the Minister that he can agree to given the relatively low number of terminally ill claimants: remove the waiting time, which should not be there, for terminally ill people; make the application simpler, which should be easy for this limited number of people; provide direct support or give implicit consent for agencies to apply on a claimant’s behalf; reinstate the severe disability allowance and the enhanced disability premium for terminally ill people; provide a specific journey and special rules for the terminally ill; allow the DS1500 to be submitted by third parties without explicit consent; and, easiest of all, get rid of the cruel requirement for self-certification.

7.14 pm

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): I congratulate the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) on securing a debate on this important matter. These are, of course, extremely difficult situations, and we in turn must always be careful to treat them with the highest level of sensitivity.

I will begin by setting out the recently announced changes to universal credit, which of course apply to all recipients, before addressing the hon. Gentleman’s specific points. We continue to roll out universal credit gradually, constantly improving the way the system works as we do so. I am sure that hon. and right hon. Members on both sides of the House welcome the changes to universal credit that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions announced in his statement to the House last Thursday.

New guidance will be issued to staff next month to ensure that claimants in the private rented sector who have their housing benefit paid directly to landlords are offered that option when they join universal credit. We will make two changes to advances from January. First, the maximum period over which an advance is recovered will increase from six months to 12 months, making it easier for claimants to manage their finances. That will apply regardless of the level of advance claimed. Secondly, we are increasing the amount of support that a claimant can receive through an advance from up to 50% of their estimated entitlement to up to 100%. Of course, the advance is interest-free.

If someone is in immediate need, we can fast-track the payment so that they receive it on the same day. In practice, new claimants in December can already receive an advance of up to 50% of their estimated overall entitlement, and may receive a second advance in the new year to take it up to 100%. Taken with the first scheduled payment, that means that claimants in need could receive nearly double the amount of cash that they would previously have received over that period.

In addition, from spring next year, we will make it possible to apply for an advance online, further increasing accessibility for those who need it. From February we will remove the seven-day waiting period, reducing the time claimants might wait to receive their first full payment. From April, for new claimants already receiving support towards their housing costs, we will provide an additional payment of two weeks’ housing benefit to support them as they transition to universal credit, which will help to address the issue of rent arrears for those most in need.

It is important that I explain that the personal independence payment is a separate benefit to universal credit. It will continue to be paid weekly in advance to provide important financial support to help people to meet the additional costs of disability in the latter stages of their life. PIP is also not taken into account when assessing entitlement to universal credit. To be clear, PIP is not a benefit that is being replaced by universal credit. PIP and UC are not comparable, as they are not intended for the same thing.

Income-related employment and support allowance and the linked disability premiums, including the severe disability premium, are being replaced by universal credit as part of the process of simplifying benefits to help us address overlaps. To mirror the design of ESA, universal credit has two disability elements for adults. The higher rate is set at a substantially higher level than the equivalent support group level in ESA. By structuring the rates in that way, the Government are making it clear that they are not looking to make savings. Transitional protection will also be provided for those claimants who are transferred across to universal credit by the Department for Work and Pensions and who have not had a change of circumstances.

We will continue to listen to and act on feedback as we roll out universal credit. I regret to say that mistakes can be made in any benefits system and, when errors happen, I am sorry. Of course we recognise that people with health conditions or disabilities face extra challenges. People may be dealing with more than one condition or disability, and the same condition can affect people in different ways.

Drew Hendry: Will the Minister take on board some of the specific points that I raised? These things are easy to do and would cost nothing. Specifically, will he address the issues relating to self-certification? I also referred to other things that would be very easy to deliver, so will he consider any of those?

Damian Hinds: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will allow me to continue. As we roll out universal credit, we are absolutely committed to ensuring that terminally ill patients are treated with the utmost sensitivity and care, and receive the support they need to make a UC claim.

It might be helpful if I briefly set out to the House how the claim process works in the pre-existing system—the legacy benefit system. Under that system, additional financial support can be obtained by someone who is terminally ill by making a claim to ESA. This is a manual process that requires an application to be completed via a telephone call or a paper-based form. As part of the process, the claimant is asked whether they would like to apply for ESA under “special rules”, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned. For ESA, “special rules” means someone who has a terminal illness with a prognosis of less than six months. The claimant is asked to provide medical evidence from their GP or medical practitioner confirming this. If the claimant has already provided the medical evidence to another part of the DWP, the Department will confirm that and make a referral to an expedited work capability assessment. That is entirely
clerical; it is a review of papers. The healthcare professional will provide a report, usually within 48 hours, confirming the claimant’s prognosis and condition to the DWP, which will then be able to award immediate additional financial support by allocating the claimant to the support group. As the hon. Gentleman mentioned, the UC full service is designed to be accessed and claimed for online, although a claim can be made over the phone or via a home visit, which can be arranged if needed.

Universal credit has a similar process in place to support claimants when they have been diagnosed as terminally ill to make sure that additional support is provided as quickly as possible.

I am aware of the concerns raised by the hon. Gentleman about the process of notifying the DWP about a claimant’s terminal illness. However, we do not need to change the consent rules in UC to support these claimants; we can already accept information directly from claimant representatives, such as claimant appointees and third-party organisations representing the claimant. However, we are also aware that there are instances when this is not happening as intended, and we are working very hard to make sure that the system works properly, with all the necessary guidance and procedures in place to support terminally ill claimants and to help our operational staff to assist them.

As part of the training that our staff receive, they are made aware that claimants might not know their prognosis or condition and that they therefore should not record or refer to the nature or detail of the illness on the full service journal or in discussions, unless requested by the claimant. Our approach is, and always has been, that we must ensure that terminally ill claimants are treated sensitively and with empathy at all times.

When a claim is made to UC where the claimant is terminally ill, we want to ensure that claimants receive any eligible additional financial support as quickly as possible. To make sure that that happens, the claimant is asked if they have a terminal illness. We have already asked that question of ESA claimants, but using the terminology of “special rules”. I must stress that, in effect, the two questions are the same. We changed the wording to make things clearer to the individual, and to make sure that people would be able to get the support to which they are entitled and which they need. That applies to new claims and to existing claims on a change of circumstances.

When somebody presents with such an illness, they are given the option of continuing to provide further information themselves, or of receiving support from the DWP to do so. When they indicate that they would like support, it becomes a high-priority task for a case manager to telephone the claimant to gather the information on their behalf. A home visit can also be arranged.

The most usual way for claimants to supply evidence of such an illness is by providing the DS1500 form to which the hon. Gentleman referred. It is issued for the DWP by a GP or healthcare professional, either to the claimant or to their representative. We check our systems immediately and as a matter of course to see whether we already hold a DS1500 that was submitted as part of another claim. If one is already held, we reuse it for the universal credit claim. Receipt of that information indicates to us that the claimant must receive immediate access to DWP support, and that support immediately results in an additional £318.78 per month being included in their universal credit entitlement. The additional amount is payable from day one of their claim. In addition, the claimant is completely removed from any conditionality requirements.

The Department and the universal credit programme have regular meetings with key stakeholders, including Macmillan, Maggie’s centres and Mind, to understand how our policies are working, and to identify and discuss possible areas for improvement. I recognise that the hon. Gentleman has encountered universal credit claimants who have had issues with the service in his constituency. As I acknowledged earlier, things can go wrong, and when they do, I am sorry for that. If cases involve vulnerable claimants, it is particularly important that they are escalated, investigated and resolved quickly.

I am aware that the hon. Gentleman has an effective direct relationship with the Scotland complaint resolution team, as well as with our local operations team, which has helped to manage a number of urgent cases to successful resolution.

As we continue to deliver the full universal credit service—it is now available in 178 jobcentres—with its expanded claimant base, we are continuing to review and further develop the customer journey for claimants with complex needs, including by looking into how we support terminally ill claimants to engage in the process. In that context, I welcome the hon. Gentleman raising these important issues on the Floor of the House. I do recognise that there are areas for improvement in the service, but he has seen for himself the drive, commitment and passion of so many of our staff, stakeholders and people working across universal credit to see this important reform through.

Question put and agreed to.

7.27 pm

House adjourned.
The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): May I start by making the House aware of the fact that, as you are aware, Mr Speaker, the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), is unfortunately not with us this morning, because he has been invited to appear before a Select Committee. I am sure you will share my slight disappointment that any Committee would call a Minister when he is supposed to be giving oral answers to the House, but that is his reason for not being here.

The two things we are doing to improve north-south rail connections in the UK are, first, building High Speed 2—the first new north-south railway in this country for over a century, which will have a transformational effect on people in the midlands, the north of England and Scotland. We will also shortly see the arrival of the new fleet of inter-city express trains, which will operate on the east coast main line, enabling additional and faster services between key locations on the route. Of course, those trains will run right up the east coast to Scotland.

Luke Graham: I thank my right hon. Friend for that. While acknowledging that rail funding will increase from £3 billion to £3.6 billion in the next spending period, may I ask what consideration has been given to improved road connections between Scotland and England, especially along the east coast?

Chris Grayling: The east coast is the key priority in road-building terms. We are very close to opening what will, extraordinarily, be the last bit of motorway linking London and Newcastle: it is long, long overdue, and I am amazed it has not happened already. We are then pressing ahead with dualling the A1 north of Newcastle, and my goal is to take that up to the border, but it will be for the SNP and the Scottish Government to make sure that something is there to meet us coming the other way.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister might know that I have probably done more miles on the east coast line than any other Member of this House. May I tell him, with that experience, that it is chaos again on the east coast? Stagecoach is being let off the obligation to pay the full money it should be paying to the British Exchequer. Yet again, the east coast line is in a mess, and he is doing nothing about it.

Mr Speaker: I am very glad that the hon. Gentleman has already recovered from his obvious misery at Arsenal’s demolition of his team by five goals to nil last night.

Chris Grayling: A tiny bit below the belt, I think, Mr Speaker, but the hon. Gentleman seems to have weathered the storm pretty well.

The hon. Gentleman will be aware that, notwithstanding issues on the east coast main line, passenger satisfaction on that route has actually improved rather than reduced; indeed, the money flowing to the taxpayer has increased rather than reduced, so he is slightly misjudging the current position.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): The Secretary of State knows how important the east coast main line is to Newark and my constituents. In recent years, Network Rail’s performance has been poor, and the track does need considerable investment. That is the principal reason why delays have increased on the east coast main line. Will the new public-private partnership see more investment and improvements on the track?

Chris Grayling: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. In fact, we have a substantial investment programme lined up for the east coast main line, upgrading power supplies and improving the tracks, and that will certainly be steered by the new partnership.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): To go back to rail funding, the Secretary of State is well aware that there is a £600 million gap in the allocation of funding to Scotland for the next investment period. Previously, rail funding to Scotland was based on its percentage of the network—that funding formula was developed in 2005—so will he explain why, if he thinks north-south rail links are a priority, he is quite happy for there to be a cut in rail funding on his watch?

Chris Grayling: As I keep telling the hon. Gentleman, I am very happy that funding is allocated to Scotland on the basis of the Barnett formula. I thought that was the way things worked.

Alan Brown: Let me explain to the Secretary of State that the previous rail funding was based on need and on Scotland’s percentage of the rail network. Helpfully, the other day the Secretary of State for Business, Energy
and Industrial Strategy acknowledged that the allocation of funding to Scotland for infrastructure should be based on need and geography, and it should be the same for rail. In answer to a question tabled in October, the Secretary of State for Transport said he has “various discussions” with the Secretary of State in Scotland only “from time to time”. Is it not time that he prioritised this issue, and will he agree to meet me and the Transport Secretary for Scotland to discuss the budget and north-south linkages?

Chris Grayling: If the hon. Gentleman wants to meet the Government to discuss the removal of the Barnett formula and the move towards needs-based allocation of funding across the piece for Scotland, I am sure that would be a very interesting discussion; but in this country over the past few years we have tended to follow the Barnett formula. Most recently, we have provided additional funding to Scotland through the allocations in the Budget. Money has been spent on capital investment in England and money is to be spent based on the Barnett formula in Scotland. That is the way we operate.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): We learned yesterday that the east coast rail franchise will be terminated in 2020—three years early—potentially forfeiting billions of pounds in premiums due to the Treasury, yet the Secretary of State told the House that Stagecoach will meet in full the commitments it made to the Government to discuss the removal of the Barnett formula. Most recently, we have provided additional funding to Scotland through the allocations in the Budget. Money has been spent on capital investment in England and money is to be spent based on the Barnett formula in Scotland. That is the way we operate.

Andy McDonald: Can we get to the heart of this? Will the premiums of some £2 billion due under that contract covering the years 2020 to 2023 be paid? Will they be paid—yes or no?

Chris Grayling: Self-evidently, given my announcement yesterday that we would have the east coast partnership in place in 2020, there will be new arrangements in place in 2020. As I have said to the hon. Gentleman, every franchisee makes a parent company commitment before taking out the contract and we will hold that that commitment will be met in full.

Andy McDonald: Can we get to the heart of this? Will the premiums of some £2 billion due under that contract covering the years 2020 to 2023 be paid? Will they be paid—yes or no?

Chris Grayling: Every time a franchisee takes up a new contract it makes a parent company commitment to the Government. That commitment will be kept in full.

Andy McDonald: Can we get to the heart of this? Will the premiums of some £2 billion due under that contract covering the years 2020 to 2023 be paid? Will they be paid—yes or no?

Chris Grayling: Self-evidently, given my announcement yesterday that we would have the east coast partnership in place in 2020, there will be new arrangements in place in 2020. As I have said to the hon. Gentleman, every franchisee makes a parent company commitment before taking out the contract and we will hold that that commitment will be met in full.

Express Train Services

2. Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): What steps is he taking to improve express train services.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): Only last month new inter-city express trains entered service on Great Western, and indeed east coast will be introducing new Azuma express trains from late 2018. We have also committed £55.7 billion on HS2 to transform the network and bring economic growth between our major cities, operating state-of-the-art trains.

Rachel Maclean: I thank the Minister for his answer and I welcome the rail strategy that was announced yesterday in the House. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State knows of my keen interest in the express services from Redditch to Birmingham, and I am grateful for the interest he has shown by meeting me. Will the rail Minister agree to meet me and the train operators in the light of the new franchise that has been announced for our services, to look again at the business case and see whether we can push this issue forward?

Paul Maynard: I am always happy to meet colleagues, and train operating companies—indeed, at the same time is even better for me. We always seek journey time improvements on networks, not least by improving roll-out times for new rolling stock. I know that my hon. Friend will welcome the fact that we have earlier and later services from Redditch into Birmingham, and an increased frequency. I am more than happy to meet her to discuss what more can be done.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): One of the ways of improving express train services is to open up new routes. Does the Minister agree with me and his right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson) that the opening up of a route from Chester via Wrexham and Shrewsbury to London would ease pressures on the Chester-London service and be an excellent, novel way of addressing capacity difficulties on the line?

Paul Maynard: I know that the hon. Gentleman listened carefully to yesterday’s strategy announcement, in which he will have heard a lot of reference to reopening lines and opening new lines. I am sure that we will be considering that idea further and I look forward to hearing further details.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): The Government have embarked on the biggest upgrade programme for our railways since the Victorian era. What role can that play in addressing the pressing need to improve our productivity in this country?

Paul Maynard: My right hon. Friend is quite right to point out that our significant investment in the railways is underpinned by our belief that we need to improve productivity. Just today, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will launch the HS2 productivity report in Nottingham, which will set out how we intend to use HS2 to improve our productivity performance here in the UK.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): There is a lot of talk about improvements to the midland main line. Currently, the last train from Sheffield to London leaves some two hours earlier than the last train from other cities such as Manchester and Bristol. Will the Minister assure us that when the new franchise is let, that aspect of poor service delivery will be addressed?

Paul Maynard: I was not aware of the precise information regarding late services from Sheffield, but I am sure they are as entitled to a late departure as any other city in the north. We are looking carefully at the timetable as part of the new franchise, and I am sure that will be taken into account, given that the hon. Gentleman has raised it.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Will the rail Minister say what discussions have been held with freight users about short-notice terminations of freight trains causing hundreds of tonnes of cargo to move on to our roads?
Paul Maynard: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising the issue of freight. It is an important part of our railway that perhaps gets overlooked by many who do not think carefully about how we utilise our rail network. I have frequent meetings with the rail sector and frequent engagement with officials in the Department. We always look to embed concerns about freight in any decisions that we take about the future of the network.

**Tyres: Safety**

3. Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the safety implications of tyres on motor vehicles being more than 10 years old.

Mr Cunningham: Surveys show that 27% of drivers do not check or maintain their tyres. What is the Minister doing to raise public awareness about this?

Mr Hayes: We are acting on exactly that matter. The Department has introduced measures to manage the use of tyres aged 10 years or more on the steering axles of buses and coaches. Written copies of our guidance have been delivered to every single bus and coach operator in Great Britain. The guidance reflects best practice and supplements separate advice on the use of older tyres.

Maria Eagle: My Tyres (Buses and Coaches) Bill, which was published this week, is down on the Order Paper for a Second Reading tomorrow. Can the Minister confirm that he and his party will not seek to oppose the legislation?

Mr Hayes: The hon. Lady has particular knowledge of this matter. I know that one of her constituents died in an accident relating to a tyre. The hon. Lady came to see the previous Secretary of State, and I know that she has seen the roads Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman) about the matter. She is right to take it seriously.

Although I am not going to comment on the question that the hon. Lady asked me—you would not expect me to, Mr Speaker—I will say this to her, and I hope that she will respect how seriously I take the matter. She is right to take it seriously. We have issued the new guidance, but I think there is a need for more research, and I am prepared today to commit my Department to engaging in further research with the experts in the industry and others to establish exactly the effect of tyres’ age on safety and security. The safe and secure passage of people is our first priority, and we will do all that is necessary to secure it.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): The Tyred campaign was highlighted to me at party conference. As someone who formerly worked in road safety, what I found out was shocking to me, particularly because many of our children travel to school in coaches. I am delighted to hear from the Minister that the Department is undertaking to do more work on the matter. Many visitors to our constituencies come by coach, so can we commit to taking real action to ensure that no more people die in this way?

Mr Hayes: Absolutely; I understand the point that my hon. Friend makes, and the tragedy that I mentioned in my previous answer involved a young person. My hon. Friend is right that public safety is an absolute priority, so the Department has liaised closely with the British tyre industry to develop a comprehensive guide to good practice. The guide gave a clear recommendation that older tyres should simply not be used on the front axle. As I have said, I want to do more and go further, which is why I will look at the matter in even greater detail.

**High Speed 2**

4. Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): What steps he is taking to maintain the operation of national road infrastructure during the construction of High Speed 2.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): I know my hon. Friend has concerns about the impact of HS2 on the major roads in his constituency. The project has a number of measures in place to minimise the impact of HS2 on the road network. HS2 Ltd is working closely with local highway authorities and Highways England.

Jeremy Lefroy: At the risk of clogging up my diary. Friend, I welcome the announcement from the Department for Transport last week of the £30 million that will be spent to improve road safety along phase 1 of HS2, but will the Minister advise me how the Department is undertaking to do more work on the matter. Many visitors to our constituencies come by coach, so can we commit to taking real action to ensure that no more people die in this way?

Paul Maynard: My hon. Friend need have no fear about clogging up my diary. It is always a pleasure to meet him, not least because I believe it is absolutely critical that we properly understand the impact on local roads and that all the relevant stakeholders, including local authorities, sit around the table with HS2 to address the details of its proposals.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I welcome the announcement from the Department for Transport last week of the £30 million that will be spent to improve road safety along phase 1 of HS2, but will the Minister advise me how the Department assesses the fairest way to distribute this money? Approximately a third of the route will be constructed in Buckinghamshire, but the council will receive less than £4 million of this funding.

Paul Maynard: My right hon. Friend makes a valuable point. Part of what we have to consider is where there is the biggest impact on local roads. Where there is more intensive tunnelling, as in Buckinghamshire, less of the road network will be affected. I will, however, look carefully at her comment and, if I may, I will respond to her by letter with the precise formula.
Regional Expenditure

5. Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the regional distribution of transport spending. [902659]

6. Ian Mears (Gateshead) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the regional distribution of transport spending. [902660]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): We recognise the importance of using infrastructure projects to support regional growth, which is why we are increasing Government infrastructure investment by 50% over the next four years. Such investment decisions are based on a fair and rigorous process that is designed to ensure that spending goes where it is most needed.

Mike Amesbury: Will the Secretary of State put some power—some oomph—into the northern powerhouse, and pledge to get funding for passenger trains and platforms on to the existing Mid Cheshire rail link?

Chris Grayling: As somebody who used to live very close to the Mid Cheshire rail link—indeed, I used to go walking alongside it—I am well aware of its potential. I have asked Transport for the North, which is taking the lead on making recommendations about new projects, to do work on this for me, but I should say to the hon. Gentleman that I am extremely sympathetic to the idea of trains running again on that railway line.

Ian Mearns: Between 2011 and 2016, the average spending per head of the population on transport infrastructure in London was £725, but the similar figure for the north-east was £286. The investment in Tyne and Wear Metro, which is due in three or four years’ time, is very welcome, but we have a very long historical legacy of under-investment. Will the new formula do something about that historical legacy of under-investment?

Chris Grayling: To be honest, I am less concerned with formulae than with actually doing things. I am delighted that we are renewing the Metro trains, and I said yesterday that I am very keen to pursue the Blyth to Ashington extension to the Metro line. I am very keen to ensure that we continue to develop the road network in the north-east, which is why the opening of the first complete motorway link from London to Newcastle is so important, why we need to keep on improving the A1 north of Newcastle and why dualling the A66 is so important. This is about doing things, and that is what is actually happening right now.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that doubling the line from Ely to Soham, as part of the Ely area improvement works, will bring significant benefits to the eastern region?

Chris Grayling: Absolutely. I regard this, along with the trans-Pennine upgrade, as one of the key priorities for the next railway investment control period. The Ely junction project will unlock freight and passenger capacity in a really important part of the country. Along with the investments we are putting in place elsewhere, it is a very important part of our strategy.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his support in securing £79 million of funding for a new link road from St Austell to the A30 in my constituency, as confirmed in the Budget last week. Does he agree that this and other schemes, such as dualling the A30 and the new trains that are soon to arrive in Cornwall, clearly demonstrate this Government’s commitment to investing in transport infrastructure across the whole country?

Chris Grayling: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his comments, and I am very pleased that we have got the go-ahead to deliver that road improvement for the people of Cornwall. It is really important for the regions of this country—whether the north-east or the south-west—and particularly areas that need to be given more infrastructure support so that their economies develop, to get the kind of investments that they are now getting, and we are very committed to going forward with that in the future.

17. Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Last week, the Chancellor announced an extension to youth railcards, but young people in my constituency have to take the bus to college, and the cheapest fare for a 17-year-old is £28 a week. Will the Secretary of State take some measures to help young people in the north as well as in the south?

Chris Grayling: Bus fares are something over which my Department has less control, particularly with the new franchising arrangements that are coming into place, but I will most certainly make sure that the Under-Secretary of State for Transport who is responsible for buses, my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), is aware of the hon. Lady’s concerns and that we respond to her.

Rail Electrification

7. Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What his policy is on rail electrification. [902661]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): The Government are committed to ensuring that our continued levels of record investment best address the needs of passengers and freight. Passengers expect high-quality rail services, and we are committed to electrification where it delivers genuine benefits to passengers and value for money for the taxpayer.

Diana Johnson: No rail system can be called high speed unless it is electric. After blocking Hull’s privately financed rail electrification scheme a year ago, yesterday, the Transport Secretary told the House—I am sure he will recall this—that the Liverpool to Hull Crossrail for the north would happen in parallel with the Surrey to Hertfordshire Crossrail 2. Will both lines be electrified, just as Crossrail I is electric?

Chris Grayling: At a time when we are seeing technology move very fast, people have to get away from a set focus on an individual form of motor power. Not every
125 mph train has to be powered by a particular power source. In the coming years we will see more development of bi-mode technology, battery technology and hydrogen technology. We will use the systems that make the most difference to the passenger the most cost-effectively.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Despite the creaking electrification infrastructure on the east coast, the 43-page “Connecting People” was jammed with funding cancellations, possible reopenings, readjusted delivery dates, delayed promises and a lot of words to try to hide what we all now know was the central purpose—to conceal the deal on the failed Stagecoach franchise.

The new partnership that passengers want is their trains to arrive on time, so when will we see the upgrade to the electrification works needed on the east coast?

Chris Grayling: As I said earlier, the key point is that the next investment control period contains a programme of continued upgrade and investment for the east coast main line, to go along with the arrival of a new generation of smart, new, effective, passenger-friendly trains. All of that will happen so that we deliver those improvements and passenger services. Having heard the shadow Secretary of State’s questions earlier, I think that he has not understood that this will be a completely fresh partnership with potentially new partners and a new way forward, delivering better services for passengers in a more joined up way.

Rachael Maskell: More structural changes, but the electrification wait continues. Let us look at these new rail partnerships. They are moving a public service to the control of private companies. This is not devolution to the rail authorities or to the people, it is devolution to the shareholders; it is further fragmentation and privatisation of the railway, failed operators now being handed the tracks as well as the trains, and nothing to address the electrification upgrade.

Is it to recoup these costs that the ticket prices will be soaring by 32% since 2010 after Christmas?

Chris Grayling: Two points: Labour Members should remember how much fares rose when they were in power; and they might like to explain why their friends in the unions have in their training manuals a requirement for negotiation for RPI increases in the future. Why is that? Why do they not tell their union friends to change their ways of operation?

Potholes

8. Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): What steps he is taking to reduce the number of potholes. [902662]

The Minister for Transport Legislation and Maritime (Mr John Hayes): The Government are providing local highway authorities in England, outside London, £296 million between 2016 and 2021. That includes an extra £46 million that was announced in the autumn Budget last week. I am sure that local authorities right across the country will welcome their share of funding and put it to good use.

Alex Burghart: We have heard some thoughtful remarks about tyre quality on both sides of the House this morning, and road quality is the flip side of that coin. Many of my constituents suffer from pothole-marked roads. In our Conservative manifesto this year we committed to improve the quality of roads and fill potholes. Will my right hon. Friend tell my constituents that we remain committed to that?

Mr Hayes: Potholes are a menace; they are a drain on the economy and damage hard-working family cars. That is why the funding that the Government are providing local authorities in England outside London from the pothole action fund is enough to fix nearly 6 million potholes—or, even better, to stop them from forming in the first place. People deserve to see smooth and safe roads as they look back in Ongar.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): In 2006, the annual local road maintenance study estimated that it would take nine years to repair every pothole on our local roads. Fourteen years have now passed. How long does the Minister think it acceptable for motorists and cyclists to wait to see the necessary investment coming from the Government to repair potholes on our local roads?

Mr Hayes: It is always a mistake for someone to prepare their question before they have heard the previous answer, and if the hon. Gentleman had heard the previous answer he would have asked a different question. Notwithstanding that—I interrupt. I do not mean to be unkind to the hon. Gentleman; he is right to raise the issue. Potholes are a nightmare, and we have made that absolutely clear. That is why we are putting the money in place to deal with them. There is always more that we can do, and I will take his question as a spur to do still more.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Although the A180 suffers from its fair share of potholes, the bigger problem for road users and residents in Healing and Stallingborough is the concrete surface. I urge the Minister to have discussions with Highways England to see how a phased programme to replace the concrete surface could be introduced.

Mr Hayes: This is not the first time that my hon. Friend, with typical assiduity and diligence, has raised the issue of that concrete surface—indeed, he has raised it with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. I am inclined to visit my hon. Friend and drive on that road with him to see for myself exactly what is happening. Having done so, I will certainly look again at all we can do to improve that surface and other road surfaces, as the Secretary of State has committed to do. My hon. Friend is right: road surfaces make a difference, and they deserve our close attention. They will certainly get mine.

Private Sector Investment

9. Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): What assessment he has made of the role of private sector investment in improving rail services for passengers. [902663]
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State told the House only yesterday, the private sector has generated almost £6.6 billion of private investment over the past decade, providing new trains, upgrading stations and transforming the passenger experience.

Jack Brereton: I thank my hon. Friend for that response. Will he please inform the House about what measures are being taken to improve services on the Crewe-Derby line—the north Staffordshire line—that runs through my constituency of Stoke-on-Trent South?

Paul Maynard: I share my hon. Friend's concerns about the line; I often have to travel on it back to Blackpool myself. When I am in the east midlands, I am often struck by the fact that there is usually only a two-carriage train that is not always fit for the demand on that line. As he will know, the east midlands consultation is ongoing at the moment. We are carefully considering the responses, which include my hon. Friend's. I am sure that we will see further improvements in the line as part of the bids that come forward.

19. [902675] Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): I particularly welcome the document that came out yesterday and the point it makes about regional rail partnerships, which many experts agree are the answer for driving passenger satisfaction and value for money. They should be the first stage towards vertically integrated companies. Will the Minister confirm that that might be the final destination for those partnerships?

Paul Maynard: As the Secretary of State said yesterday, this is all about evolution rather than revolution. We have been aware since the time of the McNulty report of the attraction of bringing track and train together, and we need to make sure that such alliances work in the interests of passengers. The more that that occurs and the more we see the benefits of joint working, the more those benefits will develop across the entire rail network.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I welcome the publication yesterday of the invitation to tender for the South Eastern franchise. When the new franchise is let, I hope that we will see better services for my constituents in Faversham and Mid Kent.

I note that one part of the ITT is that there will no longer be a first class, in order to provide more space in trains and better travelling conditions. But constituents of mine with disabilities have told me that they use first class to make sure that they have a seat. What steps will my hon. Friend take to make sure that in future people with disabilities will be able to get a seat on busy trains?

Paul Maynard: That is a valuable point, although personally I do not believe that travellers should have to buy first-class tickets in order to be seated suitably. All train operating companies have an obligation to treat disabled passengers as fairly as possible, and I will reflect on how we can ensure that the aspect that my hon. Friend has identified is considered in the context of future franchises.

Eye Tests: Drivers

10. David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): If he will make it his policy to use electronic motorway signage to encourage drivers to have their eyes tested.

The Minister for Transport Legislation and Maritime (Mr John Hayes): Highways England is responsible for operating motorways and major A roads in England. It uses electronic variable message signs primarily to advise drivers of immediate safety issues and to provide journey information for road users. The country has a very good safety record, but improvements can always be made, and drivers can do their bit by regularly ensuring that their eyes are tested and that they are fit to drive.

David Linden: I wish you and all hon. Members a very happy St Andrew's day, Mr Speaker.

Last week, which was road safety week, we had the pleasure of hosting Vision Express and the charity Brake at the House. They explained to Members how important it is to have their eyes tested, which 1.5 million car users have not done. Will the Minister follow the example of the Scottish Government, who ran an electronic motor signage pilot last week, to ensure that road conditions are safer?

Mr Hayes: We could do something very practical: we could get the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency to remind drivers of the importance of good eyesight in the letter that it sends to them when their licences are renewed. We will certainly be doing that. As for the issue of road signage, too much signage poses a risk: evidence from Highways England, which consulted road users, suggests that the more of it there is, the less notice people take of it. We need to be careful about just how much signage we put on our roads, and to concentrate on the vital messages that are central to safety and good advice.

Passenger Trends

11. Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of trends in rail passenger usage.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): The latest statistics published by the Office of Rail and Road for the first quarter of 2017-18 show a slight decline in the number of rail journeys, although passenger kilometres and revenue have increased since the previous year.

Dan Carden: Since 2010, rail fares have risen by 27%, at twice the rate of wages, and the steepest fare hikes for five years are due in January. Meanwhile, passenger numbers are declining, and more and more of my constituents are being priced out of rail travel altogether. When will the Government accept that the whole system of rail franchising and private profiteering from our railways is utterly broken?

Paul Maynard: Opposition Members really should not try to draw conclusions from one quarter’s statistics to underpin their own ideological agenda. The simple fact is that far more passengers have been using our rail networks than ever before. I believe that privatised
railways have been a success. The alternative that the hon. Gentleman has proposed would ensure that passengers were always at the back of the queue whenever any decision was made by any ghastly future Labour Government.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): More passengers are using the great western main line than ever before, but we need more investment in that line to ensure that journeys are fast and resilient. If our journeys are to continue to be slow, however, will the Minister commit himself to extending the GSM-R mobile phone trial that is taking place in Scotland and the north of England to Devon and Cornwall?

Paul Maynard: The hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to growing demand for journeys to the south-west. I believe that Great Western is doing a very good job at running the franchise. We are very supportive of the work of the Peninsula Rail Task Force, and we are trying to pull together all the work that is being done to ensure that we have a clear idea of what more we can do. I will certainly consider the hon. Gentleman’s idea carefully.

Main Line Services: Kettering

12. Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): If he will include half-hourly main line train services north from Kettering in the next midland main line franchise.

[902667]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): As my hon. Friend will know from yesterday’s statement, there are currently two trains per hour between Kettering and Nottingham serving the evening peak, and one train per hour during the rest of the day. Our proposal for the next east midlands franchise is for a minimum of one train per hour between Kettering and Nottingham throughout the day, but no firm decision has been made yet. I will listen carefully to my hon. Friend’s further representations.

Mr Hollobone: On any objective analysis, the superb submission to the east midlands franchise consultation by the Kettering rail users group must be one of the best that the Minister’s office has received. May I invite him to reread the submission in even greater detail, given that it contains an overwhelmingly compelling case for Kettering to be the optimum connectivity hub in the new east midlands franchise?

Paul Maynard: I happily pay tribute to the work of the Kettering rail users association; I always find that the views of those who use our rail network are a source of great wisdom. As my hon. Friend knows, we have had the biggest upgrade on the midland main line since 1870, with the creation of a sixth path. We are keen to maintain as many northbound opportunities as possible from Kettering, and I will review that submission in greater detail.

Road Safety

13. Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve safety for cyclists, pedestrians and motorists.

[902668]

The Minister for Transport Legislation and Maritime (Mr John Hayes): The British road safety statement, published in December 2015, sets out the Government’s priorities for action, including measures to help vulnerable groups to stay safe on roads, extra money to crack down on drug-affected drivers, and tougher penalties for using mobile phones while driving.

Sir Henry Bellingham: Is the Minister of State aware that the King’s Lynn guide dogs forum is campaigning hard to highlight the impact of selfish pavement parking on blind and visually impaired people? It also recently took me on a blindfolded walk through the centre of King’s Lynn, which brought home to me the scale of this problem, and I highly recommend that the Minister of State and Secretary of State do such a blindfolded walk with the guide dogs organisations in their constituencies.

Mr Hayes: I went on such a walk a few weeks ago in Spalding town centre, and I recommend it to hon. Members; I know many will have done it. It gives an entirely different insight into the struggle that people have getting around town centres when others have inconsiderately parked and there are many obstacles in their way. It also gives a real understanding of how wonderful our guide dogs are. It is important that the Government do their bit. Of course the charitable sector does an immense amount, too. I certainly take my hon. Friend’s further representations.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The Minister will know that one of the biggest obstacles to the take-up of cycling is people’s fears about safety. Has he done an assessment of whether the necessary resources are in place to implement the cycling, walking and investment strategy, and if he has, could he publish it?

Mr Hayes: As the hon. Gentleman implies, we do have such a strategy. He is also right that cyclists need the same kind of attention that I mentioned in my previous answer. They can be put into hazardous circumstances by a range of different obstacles that they encounter as they go about their business. The Government are strongly committed to cycling, as I think he knows, but he is right that we must look closely at the hazards cyclists face, and that will be included in the strategy.

A417 Air Balloon Roundabout

14. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): What progress has been made on the A417 Air Balloon roundabout missing link upgrade.

[902669]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): My hon. Friend knows well the interest I have taken in this project. Highways England is currently conducting a final review of the route options for the A417 missing link. It is on track to launch a public consultation early in the new year.
Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: My right hon. Friend knows that the south-west is a low-growth area. This is a highly important strategic national road scheme linking the south-west with the midlands and the Thames corridor. Does he agree that we need to get on and build this scheme as soon as possible?

Chris Grayling: It is not just about that; we also know that this is a highly dangerous piece of road, where, tragically, there has been a further accident with loss of life in the past few weeks. So it is not just about creating the right economic links; it is also about creating a safer road network. For both those reasons I have been very clear with Highways England that I want to get on with this project.

Electric Vehicles: Scotland

18. Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on the uptake of electric vehicles.

The Minister for Transport Legislation and Maritime (Mr John Hayes): I have ongoing discussions with the Scottish Government, as well as all the devolved Administrations, about the uptake of electric vehicles, and the Automated and Electric Vehicles Bill—which I recommend very strongly to the hon. Gentleman—is progressing through Parliament. There is also strong engagement at an official level through the Office for Low Emission Vehicles with all devolved Administrations.

Stuart C. McDonald: I thank the Minister for that answer. The Scottish Government aim to establish one of the most comprehensive charging networks in Europe, so we welcome the announcement of £400 million for the most comprehensive charging networks in Europe, of £300 million in the autumn Budget—£200 million for electric charge points as part of the industrial strategy, and £100 million for the plug-in car purchase grant. What recent discussions has he had with the Scottish Government on the uptake of electric vehicles?

Mr Hayes: That is a good point. This was considered closely in Committee, and, as the hon. Gentleman will know, the provisions of the Bill allow for the development of more charge points, supported by the announcement of £300 million in the autumn Budget—£200 million for infrastructure and £100 million for the plug-in car grant. However, he is right to suggest that we need to be mindful of the effect in rural areas. I do not want us to end up with certain areas covered by good infrastructure but it being absent elsewhere. I said in Committee, and I repeat here in the House, that we will look at further measures to ensure the even spread of the infrastructure.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): More and more people in East Renfrewshire are looking to purchase electric vehicles, but they are put off by the lack of charging points. What steps will the Minister take to ensure that charging point infrastructure is consistent right across the UK?

Mr Hayes: There are a number of ways in which we can do that. I have spoken about major retailers, and there are provisions relating to them in the Bill. That will tend to mean that charge points are clustered around major arterial routes, but the good news is that I am working closely with colleagues to make sure that local authorities ensure that there are on-street charging points. I am open to other suggestions about how we might ensure that charge points are spread across the country, and I invite such suggestions from Members right across the House as the Bill makes its progress through Parliament.

Driving Tests

20. Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with (a) the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency and (b) the Public and Commercial Services union on new components of the driving test to be introduced on 4 December 2017.

The Minister for Transport Legislation and Maritime (Mr John Hayes): Me again! It is almost too much of a good thing, isn’t it? But you can never have too much; you know that, Mr Speaker.

The Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency has agreed proposals to reform the practical car driving test in April. It has maintained a dialogue with the Public and Commercial Services union about the components of the new driving test throughout the development of the proposals between 2015 and the present day.

Martyn Day: What plans does the Minister have to meet the workers and unions in the DVSA before 4 December, when more than 2,000 staff will be taking strike action over concerns about the new test? What assurance can he give me that the safety issues in question will be addressed before the test is rolled out?

Mr Hayes: Proust said that a "powerful idea communicates some of its strength to him who challenges it", and I hope that the power of my idea will have some resonance with the hon. Gentleman. The truth is that these changes are supported by the driver training and road safety representatives who helped us to develop and trial them. More than 4,500 learner drivers and 860 driving instructors took part in research at 32 locations across Britain. At no stage has anyone said that the changes will not be beneficial, not least among those who took part in that process. We need to press on with the changes, because they will clearly be beneficial, and I hope that the power of that argument has been communicated to the hon. Gentleman.

Topical Questions

T1. Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): In the case of the Minister for Transport Legislation and Maritime, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes), I am sure that we have not had too much of a good thing, Mr Speaker. You will be delighted to know that it is not only the House that has heard extensively from him this week but 175 Ministers from around the world. We have
been hosting the biennial meeting of the International Maritime Organisation general assembly in London. The IMO is the specialist United Nations organisation responsible for journeymen to improve the safety and security of international shipping and to prevent pollution from ships. We host the IMO here in London. I want to thank everyone who has been involved in organising that event and to extend a warm welcome on behalf of the United Kingdom Government to all the Ministers and other delegates who have attended the convention this week.

Mr Speaker: I am sure that all those Ministers from around the world feel both informed and improved as a result of their interaction with the Minister for Transport Legislation and Maritime, the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings.

Craig Tracey: I warmly welcome last week’s announcement of an £8 million road safety fund for the areas of Warwickshire affected by HS2. Does the Secretary of State agree that the Trinity Road-Overwoods Road junction in my constituency, which has seen numerous fatalities and serious accidents, would be an excellent candidate for some of that funding, given that the proposed solution is now unlikely to go ahead owing to the development of HS2?

Chris Grayling: I am glad that the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), who is responsible for HS2, was able to visit that junction last week with my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey). I am also pleased that Warwickshire County Council has been such a beneficiary of the available funding. While it will be for the council to decide what schemes to support, I hope that it will focus on where it can make the biggest difference to safety.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): This Government are presiding over a sustained fall in the number of bus journeys taken. Just this week, Kent County Council outlined plans to axe more than 70 bus routes in a bid to save £4 million. Does the Secretary of State accept that bus passenger numbers will continue to fall until his Government halt the cuts to local authorities?

Chris Grayling: We want bus passenger numbers to rise, and the measures in the Bus Services Act 2017, which passed through the House a few months ago, will provide an environment in which bus ridership can recover and improve and will lead to more and better services around the country.

T5. [902684] Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): What assurances can Ministers give to help taxi drivers who buy the new electric taxi before the vehicle excise duty change comes into force?

The Minister for Transport Legislation and Maritime (Mr John Hayes): My hon. Friend is right that that matters to taxi drivers. A legal change is required to allow the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency to identify electric taxis as separate from cars and vans in order to apply the exemption. I wrote to the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury—I emphasise for the record that he is my former PPS—on 25 October, and I am meeting him on 12 December to discuss exactly the issue my hon. Friend raises.

T2. [902681] Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): Train services in Manchester and the north are poor, but prices keep going up and up. A constituent sent me a photo showing delays on all but one of 18 trains between 8 am and 9 am from Levenshulme in my constituency. Appallingly, the stations does not have disabled access either. Will the Minister take steps to improve the situation so that my constituents can get to work?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): We are always keen to work with our Labour friends with whom we co-manage Rail North and Transport for the North. I recognise the importance of step-free access in Greater Manchester, and I will look at the station to which the hon. Gentleman refers to see what we can do.

T6. [902685] Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): May I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his statement yesterday, which will be broadly welcomed? I much admire his gumption in sticking to his guns on an important matter. Does he agree that the service for my constituents on the East Grinstead line continues to fall well short of satisfactory? Is he aware that that is often due to the fact that train crew do not turn up? Does he agree that that is a failure of leadership and management and will he tell the company to smarten itself up?

Chris Grayling: I will happily do that. Staffing issues are always disappointing, but the other area of challenge on the Southern network has been the condition of the infrastructure. We will in the coming months be taking some major steps with some major projects to start to improve the quality of that infrastructure, including spending the £300 million we have already committed, with more to follow in the next control period.

T3. [902682] Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Transport for London transformed the dilapidated Silverlink north London line, changing it from two-car trains twice an hour to the renewed London Overground with five-car trains every 10 minutes. My constituents want to know when the delays at the decrepit Acton Main Line and West Ealing stations will finish and when TfL Crossrail will take over. First Group seems to have forgotten how to run small stations.

Chris Grayling: Crossrail is of course a massive investment in transport in London. It is not a TfL project; it is a joint project between my Department and TfL that is designed to improve the lot of passengers both inside and outside London. It will make a real difference to the south-east.

T7. [902686] Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The central forecast of the Office for National Statistics is that the population will hit 70 million by 2029—just 12 years’ time—which is up by 5 million from today and represents an increase of 8%. What is the Department’s estimate of growth in the number of vehicles over that same 12-year period? Given that our superb roads
Mr John Hayes: There are three things I can say immediately: the road record investment programme will help; the development of vehicle technology will change the use of cars—we talk about autonomous vehicles in many ways, but one effect they may have is to change our sense of car ownership by encouraging more sharing of cars; and, as my hon. Friend rightly says, we need to think about transport infrastructure in connection with other development, such as economic development, housing development, etcetera. The question he asks is so profound that it cannot be answered in a few moments here, so I invite him to the Department to sit down with officials and have a serious discussion about this important matter.

Chris Grayling: I understand why this is such a serious issue, and I would be delighted to extend an invitation to the hon. Lady to come to the Department to meet Ministers and officials to talk about what is clearly an important matter.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Well, my right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Motor racing is a great success story for this country, and it is an important part of our economy. People often do not understand the importance of the industry, which is particularly centred on Silverstone in Northamptonshire, where many of the leading teams are based. The technologies that come from small businesses and suppliers change the automotive world, not just in motor racing but across the piece. I am delighted to see the success of Formula E, and I would like to see more Formula E and more development of technologies for it in the UK. I am happy to extend the Government’s support to the motor racing industry.

Imran Hussain: There are three things I can say about this important matter. The Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), is enthusiastic about the design of our road network, how will his enthusiasm help to meet that challenge?

Chris Grayling: I am obviously well aware of that issue. It is worth remembering that we have just allocated £175 million to Leeds, which will be spent on a variety of projects around the city, but I am also aware that funding needs to flow to West Yorkshire. I will personally make sure that, as we allocate the funding, West Yorkshire is not left out.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): Will the Secretary of State welcome the fourth season of the Formula E series? The series starts in Hong Kong this Sunday and will be broadcast on Channel 5, and it aims to advance electric vehicle technology. With races taking place in 11 cities such as Paris and New York, will he look at attracting future races to the UK to complement our rapidly increasing electric vehicle technology?

Chris Grayling: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Motor racing is a great success story for this country, and it is an important part of our economy. People often do not understand the importance of the industry, which is particularly centred on Silverstone in Northamptonshire, where many of the leading teams are based. The technologies that come from small businesses and suppliers change the automotive world, not just in motor racing but across the piece. I am delighted to see the success of Formula E, and I would like to see more Formula E and more development of technologies for it in the UK. I am happy to extend the Government’s support to the motor racing industry.

Paul Maynard: Will the Secretary of State commit to looking again at this ill-thought-out policy?

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): Will the Secretary of State keep in mind the other northern powerhouse, Aberdeen, and the economic importance of its airport, including in servicing the oil and gas industry?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend and I had a productive visit to Aberdeen airport recently, and I absolutely understand its importance to the whole economy of the north-east of Scotland and indeed to the United Kingdom, because Aberdeen is central to one of our key industries. I have made it clear that as we expand Heathrow airport, we will make sure that capacity is set aside for regional links to airports in Scotland and elsewhere, so that every part of the UK benefits from the expansion of that airport.
Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): TfL has clearly demonstrated its ability to run efficient services and improve them in London, so will the Secretary of State enter into negotiations with the Mayor of London about south eastern suburban services before my constituents are forced to endure yet another bungled privatisation?

Chris Grayling: The first thing to remind the hon. Gentleman of is that London Overground is also a franchise—Labour always conveniently forgets that. It is run by Arriva. The other thing to say is that the document we published yesterday on the new south eastern franchise involves far greater additional benefits for passengers than was ever the case in the Mayor’s business plan for that franchise. The last point to make is that I have extended to TfL and the Mayor the same offer that I made and is now in force in the north for a partnership in operating, designing and managing the franchise, but that offer is yet to be accepted.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Cheshire East has the highest gross value added in the north. My constituents are extremely grateful for the Middlewich bypass funding, which is key to continuing this economic growth and delivering even more, as is the need to improve junction 17 of the M6 nearby. Will Ministers kindly give consideration to including that as part of the north’s emerging strategic transport plan?

Chris Grayling: I absolutely hear what my hon. Friend says. As someone who used to live close to that area, I understand the issues she raised, and I am sure Transport for the North will listen to her comments today. It is finalising its plans. As Cheshire and mid-Cheshire grow—the towns there have expanded considerably in recent years—there is a need to make sure that the infrastructure is fit for purpose, which is why my earlier comments about the mid-Cheshire line are also important.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I welcome the public funding for the Tyne and Wear Metro announced in the Budget, which will come through the northern powerhouse. But if the northern powerhouse is to be anything more than a marketing gimmick, such funding must be part of an overall commitment to redress the dire imbalance in transport funding between the north and the south of England. Will the Secretary of State make that commitment here and now?

Chris Grayling: I keep saying that we are actually doing things right across the north: what we are doing on the Tyne and Wear Metro; the improvements to the A1; the completion of that last motorway link; the works taking place on the M1, M6 and M62; and the A66 widening. There are projects happening all across the north. We have brand new trains arriving on the east coast main line, the upgrade of that line that lies ahead and northern powerhouse rail in the future. This Government are delivering better transport for the north of England.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Following the announcement by the Secretary of State yesterday that he will explore opportunities to restore capacity lost under the Beeching reforms in the 1960s, will he commit to looking into the possibility of reopening Aldridge station and perhaps coming to visit me in Aldridge to examine the benefits that could bring?

Paul Maynard: My hon. Friend is right to identify that project as one worth considering, and I was discussing it only this morning with the Mayor of the west midlands, Andy Street. I am more than happy to have further conversations with my hon. Friend on that matter.

Alison Thewlis (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Yesterday, I met people from nextbike, who run an excellent cycle hire scheme in Glasgow, which I often use to get to my surgeries. Does the Minister have any plans to regulate public cycle hire schemes, so that the public can be assured of their safety?

Mr John Hayes: Public hire schemes are an important part of extending provision and making cycling more widely available. As the hon. Lady will know, different schemes apply in different localities. Clearly, I am always happy to have discussions with her about this, but there are no imminent plans to make the changes that she describes.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): Residents and businesses in Rugeley face real issues as a result of HGV fly parking. Will the Minister update the House on any measures that are being taken to improve and increase HGV parking facilities?

Mr Hayes: This scheme is a subject very dear to my heart, and my hon. Friend has raised it previously in the House. She is absolutely right that the inappropriate parking of HGVs is a menace. We are trialling a “clamp first” policy in Kent. The preponderance of people who park most irresponsibly are not drivers from the United Kingdom; it is therefore difficult for local authorities to pursue them in the way that one would expect. We will look at the results of that trial and we will go further. I am determined to stop the irresponsible parking of HGVs, which causes such nuisance.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Secretary of State feel any guilt about the fact that many of my constituents and many people in this country thought during the referendum campaign that they would get back the £350 million a week they would get back from the EU? Yesterday’s announcement of a £50 billion debt that we have to pay to the EU was a shocking revelation. What is he going to do about it?

Chris Grayling: First, we made no announcement yesterday about money for the EU. Secondly, we are spending more money on transport infrastructure.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): Montrose port is vital to Angus’s local economy, and good transport links to and from the port are essential for it to flourish further. Will the Secretary of State tell me what communications he has had with Network Rail since his visit to Montrose, regarding progress on negotiations to open a direct link to Montrose port?

Mr Hayes: I have exciting news for my hon. Friend because, as she may not know, I have initiated a full connectivity study. It is absolutely right that as we invest in our ports we look at the rail and road links to them, too. The study will be published early next year.
Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Further to my earlier question to the Secretary of State about Crossrail for the north, will he confirm that Crossrail 2 will not be wholly electrified?

Chris Grayling: We have finished the design of neither Crossrail 2 nor northern powerhouse rail. My focus right now is on the projects that are under way, including electrification across parts of the north of England and a £3 billion upgrade to the trans-Pennine routes. We are already seeing better investment in the north. When we see the final shape of Crossrail 2 and northern powerhouse rail, we will see what the answer to the hon. Lady’s question is.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I will take the point of order as I understand it flows from questions, but it had better be a genuine point of order and it had better be extremely brief.

Andy McDonald: I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker. I seek your clarification. Not an hour ago, I raised the question of the £2 billion that was due from Stagecoach to the Treasury. The Secretary of State said yesterday: “let us be absolutely clear for the House that as we bring the east coast franchise to a close and move to the new arrangements, no one will get any bail-out”.—[Official Report, 29 November 2017; Vol. 632, c. 344.]

He clarified that by also saying that every franchise makes a parent-company commitment before taking out a contract and will be held to that commitment, to be paid in full. That is £232 million—

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must resume his seat. I am extremely grateful to him for his attempted point of order, but it is not a matter for the Chair.

Andy McDonald rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. It is not a matter for the Chair. If he wishes to, the Secretary of State can respond, briefly. The truth is that the hon. Gentleman is dissatisfied with the position that the Government have taken. If he wishes to explore the matter further, which of course he can and, I dare say, will do, he can do so through questions, the use of the Order Paper or further debates, but he cannot do it any further now.

There is substantial pressure on time today, as a study of the Order Paper will demonstrate, but I thought the House would want urgently to express support for the victims of racism and bigotry and to denounce their purveyors.
Online Hate Speech

10.38 am

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op) (Urgent Question): To ask the Home Secretary if she will make a statement on the activities of Britain First, online hate speech and the sharing of inflammatory content online by the President of the United States, Donald Trump.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): Britain First is an extremist organisation that seeks to divide communities through its use of hateful narratives that spread lies and stoke tensions. The deputy leader of Britain First is subject to a pending criminal trial, accused of religiously aggravated harassment over the alleged distribution of leaflets and the posting of online material.

British people overwhelmingly reject the prejudiced rhetoric of the far right, which is the antithesis of the values that this country represents: decency, tolerance and respect. We will stand with them in doing so. That is why we launched our counter-extremism strategy in 2015 and our hate crime action plan just last year. This House should be clear that this Government will not tolerate any groups that spread hate by demonising those of other faiths or ethnicities and that deliberately raise community fears and tensions.

We have been clear: President Donald Trump was wrong to retweet videos hosted by the far right group, Britain First. When we look at the wider picture, the relationship between the UK and America, I know how valuable the friendship is between our two nations. As Home Secretary, I can tell the House that the importance of the relationship between our countries—the unparalleled sharing of intelligence between our countries—is vital. It has undoubtedly saved British lives. That is the bigger picture here and I urge people to remember that.

Stephen Doughty: Mr Speaker, you will recall that the last time I raised related matters with you before yesterday was when Members from across the House expressed their clear view to you that, after his racist and sexist behaviour, President Trump should not be afforded the honour of addressing both Houses of Parliament in Westminster Hall.

I thank the Home Secretary for her answer and the strength of her words, the Prime Minister for her comments, and the others who have spoken out over the past 24 hours. The extraordinary events we have seen undoubtedly underline why Members from across this House were right to make that call about the President not coming here and why the Prime Minister’s premature offer of a state visit should not now go ahead.

Let me be clear: I condemn the original content of the messages shared as abhorrent. Anybody who purveys hatred or violence online or in person, whether that be the fascist far right, those who falsely claim to be acting in the name of Islam, or anti-Semitic, should rightly be exposed and dealt with.

Let us also be clear: this is the President of the United States sharing with millions inflammatory and divisive content deliberately posted to sow hatred and division by, as the Home Secretary says, a convicted criminal who is facing further charges and who represents a vile fascist organisation seeking to spread hatred and violence in person and online. By sharing it, he is racist, incompetent or unthinking—or all three.

Will the Home Secretary please explain what the Government are doing to crack down on the activities, including those online, of Britain First and other far right organisations, and explain why Britain First has not yet been proscribed in the way that National Action has been?

Given the extraordinary events of the past 24 hours and the direct attack by the President on the Prime Minister for rightly condemning his actions, can the Home Secretary confirm whether the President and the Prime Minister have spoken? Has the Foreign Secretary, who, just days ago, heaped praise on the President’s statements on Twitter, saying that people related to them, summoned the US ambassador to express his concerns? Will she also advise whether President Trump’s actions and implied endorsement could have any prejudicial impact on the criminal proceedings currently under way against Ms Fransen? Is the Home Secretary aware that Ms Fransen posted a video last night online, personally urging the President to “help keep her out of prison.”?

Finally, will the Home Secretary confirm when she and the Government will take tough action, on which I support her in her efforts, on the social media companies? We have had no response from Twitter, a typically irresponsible attitude.

Let me conclude by emphasising that I love America and Americans. My true grandfather was an American GI who came to this country in 1944 to help us fight the dark forces of fascism. I have travelled the length and breadth of 25 of the United States, and it is a country and a people of extraordinary generosity, courage, kindness and humanity. But this President represents none of those things. In one of his last speeches as President, the great Republican General, protector of America at a time of great peril and friend of Britain, Dwight D. Eisenhower, said:

“Down the long lane of history, yet to be written, America knows that this world of ours, ever growing smaller must avoid becoming a community of dreadful fear and hate, and be, instead, a proud confederation of mutual trust and respect.”

As we stand in the shadow of the words of our fallen colleague, Jo Cox, I sincerely hope that her words, that we have more in common, and the words of Dwight D. Eisenhower, will be heeded in these dangerous times. We must always take a stand against hatred from wherever it comes, otherwise we will slip into the darkness.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Just before I ask the Home Secretary to respond, and on the basis of sound professional procedural advice, I ought to say to the House that Jayda Fransen, as just referenced by the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), is awaiting trial on, I believe, 14 December. I hope that Members will be conscious, while giving vent to their views, as they should and will do, of the importance of avoiding comments that could be prejudicial to the proper conduct of the criminal proceedings. I thank the hon. Gentleman.
Amber Rudd: Mr Speaker, thank you for your guidance regarding the criminal case. I hope the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) will understand if I do not reply to a particular element for the reasons you have set out, Mr Speaker.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for his words, and I share his views about America. I also love that country, having worked there for a year, and as I said in my opening answer, I am in awe of the mutual trust between us and the Americans, the effort they make to work with us, our shared values with the American people and the way their work has been so important in helping us on intelligence matters—it has undoubtedly saved British lives.

The hon. Gentleman asks what we have done about online social media extremism of various sorts. We have taken it extremely seriously, which is why I proscribed National Action, the first far-right group to be so proscribed as a terrorist organisation. He asks about other organisations to be proscribed. We are very careful in identifying what merits proscription. He may have a different view, but we abide by the letter of the law in being very clear where members or activists embark on actions that are or are not legal. We have to draw that line very carefully. We have therefore proscribed National Action and will always keep under review what other organisations may be proscribed.

The hon. Gentleman asks what else we are doing with online companies to ensure that the internet is free from dangerous material, and he will no doubt know that the UK has been leading in this area. The Prime Minister has called for more action. In the wake of the terrorist attacks this year, we called for a global internet forum for counter-terrorism, and I went myself to San Francisco for its launch in the summer. The internet companies are also taking action. Twitter now takes down 95% of illegal material with artificial intelligence. That it is now engaging in machine learning to take down this hate is an incredibly important investment and breakthrough in ensuring that more is taken down, but we are not complacent—more needs to be done—and we will always make sure that we provide the vital leadership necessary to ensure it is taken down.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman asks about the Prime Minister and whether she has spoken to the President. I will simply say that the Prime Minister will always have regular calls with the President. She has been explicit in criticising this tweet, however, and I know that she will always call it out where she sees it, which is what she has done here.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): The retweet has been condemned. We can concentrate on the wrong done by the original tweet. Can we ask the Home Secretary if we can do right by identifying, isolating, putting down and putting out the intended community, religious and ethnic strains?

Amber Rudd: It is essential that we have a fair approach to all types of extremism, and with a view to that we always make sure that far-right extremism is treated just as harshly, as it should be, as any sort of radical Islamic terrorism. It is interesting to observe that 25% of referrals to the Channel programme—the bespoke programme that follows Prevent referrals—are in fact on the far-right side.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): The Home Secretary will appreciate that the Labour party believes that the United States is our most important ally. We anticipate that any British Government would want to work closely with the United States on issues of mutual concern, and we bow to no one in our affection and respect for the American people, but on the question of the online activities of the 45th President, does she accept that the fact that he chose to retweet material from Britain First is offensive not just to British people of Muslim heritage and British people of black and minority ethnic heritage, but to all decent British people. It is also an attack on the values of this country. Although the Labour party appreciates the importance of realpolitik, we also call on the Government to make it clear that, in no way and at no time, do they give any support whatever to the distasteful views of the 45th President on race, migration and Muslim communities internationally. To do anything else would be an affront to voters in this country, whichever side of the House they support.

Amber Rudd: I thank the right hon. Lady for her powerful response. I think it is fair to say that we have been very clear. President Donald Trump was wrong to retweet videos posted by the far-right group Britain First. We have said so clearly in this House and the Prime Minister has said so clearly online. We will continue to speak freely and frankly when such activity takes place.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I think that the whole House will agree with the Prime Minister’s words. One of the advantages of having such a special relationship with the United States is that when a friend tells us we have done something dreadfully wrong, we tend to listen. Would not the world be a better place if the Prime Minister could persuade the President of the United States to delete his Twitter account?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend makes an important point. It is true that we all listen more carefully to criticism from our friends than from people with whom we do not have a relationship. I hope that the Prime Minister’s comments will have some impact on the President. It is interesting to note my hon. Friend’s advice regarding Twitter accounts; I am sure that many of us share his view.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): The Scottish National party has long taken the view that the current President of the United States should not be afforded a state visit to the United Kingdom, and yesterday’s actions have reinforced that absolutely. We respect the office of the President of the United States, which is a fantastic country and ally. However, the sharing of tweets by an extremist, offensive and racist organisation is not fitting of someone holding such high office and must be condemned unequivocally. We welcome Downing Street’s suggestion that the tweets were wrong, but we call for the Government to go further because is not one of the key dangers of a state visit that we have absolutely no idea what the President will say or tweet next and before he visits? What does he actually need to say or tweet before the idea of a state visit is ditched once and for all?
Amber Rudd: An invitation for the visit has been extended and accepted, but the dates and the precise arrangements have yet to be agreed.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): Local authorities have a key role in combating extremism. Can the Home Secretary say exactly what the Government plan to do further to support local authorities to ensure that they can undertake this role?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that local authorities have an important role to play. We actively engage with them through the Prevent programme, which allows us to support community organisations that are embedded in the local area. Those organisations can go out and engage with local groups, providing the support to safeguard people, particularly young men and women who may be becoming radicalised. It is an incredibly important part of the way in which we look after our communities, and we will continue to do so.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): We agree about the importance of our relationship with the US, and our peoples have stood together against far-right extremism and Islamist extremism and will do so again. That is exactly why we cannot pander now. Britain First gets its succour from spreading its poison and its extremism online—that is how it works—and we will continue to do so.

Amber Rudd: That is exactly why we cannot pander now. Britain First gets its succour from spreading its poison and its extremism online—that is how it works—and we will continue to do so.

Yvette Cooper: Is it not an irony that the President of the United States, who loves Twitter and talks about fake news, actually retweeted fake news? However, the real danger is that the vast majority of our constituents have never heard of Britain First, and this retweet has given it huge oxygen. Should we not all go back to our constituencies and our communities and say that, no matter what people’s faith is and no matter what their beliefs are, we are together as a community, and the President was stupid in what he did?

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his views, and I can only repeat what I have said before—that the invitation has been extended and accepted, and we have yet to make the arrangements.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): Is it not an irony that the President of the United States, who loves Twitter and talks about fake news, actually retweeted fake news? However, the real danger is that the vast majority of our constituents have never heard of Britain First, and this retweet has given it huge oxygen. Should we not all go back to our constituencies and our communities and say that, no matter what people’s faith is and no matter what their beliefs are, we are together as a community, and the President was stupid in what he did?

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his views, and I can only repeat what I have said before—that the invitation has been extended and accepted, and we have yet to make the arrangements.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): It is pretty clear, on the basis of what we already know about this fascist President, that mere words are not enough. Action is needed. Three times the Home Secretary has been asked by Opposition Members to cancel the state visit. Action is needed now, not a slap on the wrist. Cancel the state visit.

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his views, and I can only repeat what I have said before—that the invitation has been extended and accepted, and we have yet to make the arrangements.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): How would the Home Secretary respond if similar tweets to those made by President Trump were made by a Muslim leader promoting hatred? Would they be allowed into the UK?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Gentleman should not rush to that conclusion. As I hope he has heard, I have been clear that we take an even-handed approach to individuals and to extremism of any sort, which is why I took the time to point out that right-wing extremism of the sort we have seen retweeted and the sort we have seen from National Action, which meant that we proscribed it, is just as hateful and just as dangerous as any sort of radical Islamic extremism.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend and the Prime Minister on their strong words and strong action in condemning the spreading of these evil words. Will my right hon. Friend
look at encouraging the internet companies to make sure that Twitter and Facebook accounts, and other such accounts, are clearly identified as the mouthpiece of individuals and the organisations they represent? There is a risk that people think this is a general view of British people, and it clearly is not. We need to isolate these people for what they are.

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend raises the very good point, which was also raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), that we must be careful not to allow all this conversation about a hated, hate-filled group to fuel interest in the group. We want to make sure it does not represent Britain, does not represent our values, and should not in any way be interpreted as doing so. I think it is an interesting point, and one we should all act on.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): Hate breeds hate, and an attack on the Muslim community is an attack on us all. Not content with attacking minorities, in the United States, Donald Trump, by giving a platform to Britain First, a rabidly racist and neo-fascist organisation, is now actively sowing seeds of hatred in our country. At a time when the number of hate crimes in our country is increasing, what action will the Home Secretary take today to mitigate the horrific actions that the President took yesterday?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady knows, I think, that we take all forms of hate crime very seriously. We always encourage communities to report it when it takes place. I have active engagement with the police and crime commissioners and the chiefs of police to ensure that reporting does take place. Critically, we have a role to make sure that online companies do more to take material down, ensure that reports of fake news are not posted and help us identify who has been promoting hateful information. So we as a Government are on the front foot, ensuring that we engage with the online companies, show the leadership that is expected and make sure that such material is taken down.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): We all condemn and feel disgusted by the hate speech that has been propagated by Mr Trump and others. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the danger with organisations like Britain First is that they conceal their hateful activities behind a cloak of fluffiness? They sometimes talk about Remembrance Day in a very insidious way, to trick people—I am not suggesting that in relation to Donald Trump; he ought to have known better. Those are the tactics they use. What is my right hon. Friend doing, with the Government, to develop her understanding so that we can fight hate crime on all the fronts that infect our communities so dangerously?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend raises an important point. She is absolutely right that sometimes extremist far right groups try to hijack our national symbols and our national days of memorial and remembrance. We need to make sure that we always call that out. I would say to my hon. Friend, the best thing we can do is call it out, and make sure that we spread the alternative word—the alternative story—about British values.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Two million people signed a petition of outrage when the President was given an honour that has never been offered to any other President, when he was invited to make a red-carpet visit to this country in the first month of his office. Since then, he has dangerously increased tension in every frozen world conflict that he has addressed. He has disgraced himself again and again, and he worries us because his impulsive finger is on the nuclear button. If he is allowed to come to this country now, he should be treated as anyone else who breaks the law, and charged with inciting racial hatred. The Government should withdraw the invitation.

Amber Rudd: I would simply repeat that we have not yet made the arrangements for the visit, but the invitation has been extended and it has been accepted.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Politics and Twitter are a toxic mix. For politicians, tweeting encourages the transmission of half-formed ideas instead of listening to the developed arguments of others. It promotes a culture of instant reaction as opposed to considered thought, and it provokes people to immediate outrage instead of pauseful reflection. Can my right hon. Friend tell the House how politicians taking to Twitter has led to an improvement in modern civilisation?

Amber Rudd: I think that is slightly beyond my capacity today. My hon. Friend is right in so far as I think that many of us could benefit from a little more considered thought and pauseful contemplation before we press reply to Twitter attacks.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): It is important that the messages of hate spread by the President of the United States are condemned as the vile acts that they truly are. I speak on behalf of my party when I urge the Government to rescind their offer of a state visit to a President who has used his global platform to propagate intolerance. May I ask the Home Secretary to elaborate further on the pressure that will be exerted on social media platforms, such as Twitter, to prevent such untrue and poisonous content from permeating our society?

Amber Rudd: I repeat that the invitation to the President for a visit has been extended and accepted. We must remember that the United States has such an important relationship with this country in keeping us safe, and I urge all hon. Members to keep in mind the importance of that relationship before rushing to make such changes. I hope that the hon. Gentleman has heard from me this morning how seriously we take the need to make sure that all illegal content, including extreme content, is taken down from Twitter and other online platforms; and the importance of the platforms taking a more active role in ensuring that such material does not stay up.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): In a cynical attempt to harness the Brexit vote in my constituency, the English Defence League last year sought to organise a far-right march. Just nine people showed up, but that is nine people too many. Although the abhorrent views of the EDL and Britain First do not represent the mainstream in this country, does the Home Secretary agree that there is still work to do to disabuse people of such views, and that we need to bring forward more measures to allow us to do that?
Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Those organisations in no way represent the views of the British people, as we all know. There is always more work to do, and, as he says, the presence of even nine supporters is unwelcome. As has been pointed out several times in the House today, the real danger is increasingly the encouragement of extremist activity online. That is where we are focusing much of our effort, to ensure that it is not allowed to continue.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): In her previous role as Home Secretary, the Prime Minister banned from entering this country individuals who had promoted organisations peddling the hate-filled ideology of fascism. This morning, David Duke, former grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, applauded Donald Trump. The New York Times notes:

“No modern American president has promoted inflammatory content of this sort from an extremist organization.”

Not only has the commander-in-tweet done this, but he has defended it, publicly chastising the British Prime Minister for her comments. Putting aside the question of a state visit, should he even be allowed to enter our country? Unprecedented actions require unprecedented responses.

Amber Rudd: I point out to the hon. Lady that the Prime Minister has robustly replied to the President and made her views absolutely clear. On the hon. Lady’s other proposal, we do not routinely comment on individual exclusion cases.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): Is the Home Secretary satisfied that President Trump’s behaviour—this is not an isolated incident—does not undermine our important security and co-operation relationship with the United States? May I also say that just because somebody stops using Twitter, it does not mean that they cease to be a twit?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend puts his finger on it, if I may say so, in the first half of his comment when he talks about the importance of that close relationship. However strongly hon. Members feel about the President, we must protect the particular relationship that we have with the US, which does so much to keep British people safe.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): If I am honest, I think the Home Secretary is missing something here. This was not an accident, and it was not stupid; it was deliberate and intentional. The evidence for that is that even after the Prime Minister said the President was wrong, he decided to stand by Britain First. I say to the Home Secretary that it is no good saying, “We’ve been robust.” The Government have been robust before, and it has not made the blindest bit of difference: he is a racist—or pretend to do so—and then invite the man in through the front door.

In the past, when she was the Home Secretary, the Prime Minister repeatedly said that homophobes and racists who stir up hatred in this country will not be allowed into this country, and that if they come to this country they will be arrested. That is what should happen in this case, and the Home Secretary knows it. Just say it!

Amber Rudd: There is no pretence here: we are absolutely clear about the action we will take against people who propagate hate. The hon. Gentleman should not under-estimate the Prime Minister’s views on this and her absolute clarity in showing them to the public by criticising the President in her comment to him. I will not take any criticism from the hon. Gentleman on the fact that Conservative Members and the Government are committed to the agenda of making sure that we protect people and promote British values, and I will continue to take that position.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): I thank the Home Secretary for her important words this morning, echoing those of the Prime Minister. Does the Home Secretary agree that all politicians and community leaders at every level and in every community have a duty to be temperate in their language, tolerant in their actions and mindful of their social media presence, and will she make sure that she holds content platforms to account so that community cohesion and understanding are maintained?

Amber Rudd: Yes, my hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is incredibly important to make sure that we support communities in their genuine efforts, plans and programmes to hold together, despite the difficulties that may come along. We saw that this year when, in spite of and in the wake of a series of terrorist attacks, our communities did hold together, and many of them went out of their way to support other faiths when other people were criticising them. That is the British way, those are our values and that is what we should be proud of.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): We must take a firm stance against hate speak and ensure that future generations do so as well. Will the Home Secretary and her colleagues consider supporting Holocaust education in schools so that younger generations understand the importance of standing up against discrimination and the very grave consequences of inaction?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady makes a very important point, and I thank her for raising it. The Holocaust Educational Trust does incredibly good and important work. I know that because some of the children in my schools in Hastings and Rye have been on such trips, and I have been on one myself. It is a very powerful way of remembering the terrible things that happened, and of learning how by remembering them we can make sure that they do not happen again. I absolutely support her point.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Does the Home Secretary share my astonishment at the fact that someone in the position of the President of the United States actually finds the time to trawl through Twitter looking for posts as abhorrent as the ones he has retweeted? Does she share my view that far from making America great again, his actions in retweeting those tweets reflect badly on his office and undermine the very principles on which the United States was founded?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend makes a very important point, and that is why the Prime Minister was so swift and so firm in her response to the President’s tweets.
Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): When I think of Muslim children in Newcastle waking up to find themselves being attacked by the President of the United States of freedom, liberty and respect for everyone, whatever their religion or background. I am very saddened by what Trump has done. Like many people in our country, I have been a great friend of America. Indeed, as a very young man, I emigrated to the United States, and still cherish my old green card. So many of my American friends and relatives have said to me in the past few hours, “This man does not speak for America. This man is betraying the traditions of the United States of freedom, liberty and respect for everyone, whatever their religion or background.” Please, as we negotiate this thing, stop this man coming on a state visit. If he comes, there will be unparalleled demonstrations in this country. Please will the Home Secretary act now before it is too late?

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his views, but no date has been agreed yet.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I emphasise that what the President of the United States has said on Twitter is not what the American people feel. I am sure that most Americans are embarrassed by and abhor what the President has done. The Home Secretary is in charge of policing in this country so this is a very serious and direct question. Inciting racial and religious hatred is a crime in this country. Have Twitter or the President of the United States committed a crime?

Amber Rudd: We keep all potential crimes of the type that the hon. Gentleman has referred to under review. I will not comment on individual cases of the type that he has referred to. I am sure that he can conclude by himself on the line between free speech and criminal activity. I think I will leave it at that.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Two years ago, I tabled an early-day motion calling for then presidential candidate Trump to be banned from visiting the United Kingdom until he retracted the extremely divisive comments he had made at that time. Given his tweets yesterday and overnight, it is clear that he has not changed. That is the key point. Will the Home Secretary tell me why it is right for someone so intent on stirring up hatred, contrary to the values of this country, to be invited here for an all-expenses-paid state visit at the expense of the taxpayer?

Amber Rudd: What about the values of the American people, of whom he is the President? So many Members on both sides of the House have said how much they admire the American people. Those are the values that I admire and with which I feel we have much in common.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): As the Home Secretary will know very well, in this tolerant country of ours, non-Muslims and Muslims live in peace together as friends and neighbours—sometimes as members of the same families. How do I go back and explain to my
Amber Rudd: I would urge the hon. Gentleman to make, perhaps, some of the points that I have made today in the House—that Mr Trump is the American President and we have such admiration and affection for the American people and share values with them in so many different ways. We are also so grateful to their intelligence and security services, with whom we work so closely. The closeness of that work, the trust between us, allows them to help save British lives so effectively. That is why we have such a close and special relationship with the Americans.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Taking the charitable view that the President of the United States does not know the character of the organisation whose vile utterances he has endorsed, will the Home Secretary assure the House that the Government will make him well aware of their view of the character of this organisation and its effects, so that he has the opportunity clearly to distance himself from any association with it before there can be any question of his visiting the United Kingdom?

Amber Rudd: It is certainly our intention to be absolutely clear that the type of organisation that the President appeared to be promoting in his retweet is wholly unwelcome and full of hate, and we will continue to call that out. I think my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made that clear in her criticism of him, but we will not miss an opportunity to make that point again—and we will do so strongly and firmly.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Back in 2010, the now Prime Minister, as Home Secretary, banned radical Indian televangelist preacher Zakir Naik from entering the UK for his repeated pattern of unacceptable behaviour—in particular his line that “every Muslim is a terrorist”. Her exact words at the time were: “I am not willing to allow those...not...conducive to the public good to enter the UK.”

Surely the same applies to President Trump and his frequent repugnant outbursts? We are in Islamophobia awareness month, which was launched here the other day. The Government’s own Casey report was quoted. It says that trigger events feed Islamophobia, which means that women have their hijabs ripped off them; that grandads are murdered on the way back from prayers; and that pigs’ heads are left on mosque doorsteps. As a Muslim, I ask the Home Secretary to do the same as her predecessor, our Prime Minister, did in those previous examples. A rapper was also excluded for his misogynist lyrics. Can the Home Secretary not just continue on that track and ban this visit altogether?

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Lady, particularly for her point about Islamophobia, which we take incredibly seriously. That is why it featured so strongly in the hate crime action plan that I launched last year and why we have provided extra money to make sure that mosques can be protected. We have also given additional financial support for Tell MAMA, which does such great work in combating Islamophobia.

We are very serious about making sure that the type of hate crime that the Prime Minister addressed as Home Secretary is taken seriously and stopped so that we can protect people. She was absolutely right to ban the people whom the hon. Lady referred to. We do not comment on individual exclusion cases, but I will make sure that we always look very carefully at that when it is appropriate.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): My constituents know too only well where extremism ultimately leads. The actions of the President cannot be isolated as a mistake; as has already been said, he is a repeat offender. These are his views, and anyone else who held them would not be welcome in this country. The Home Secretary must recognise the double standards that she is representing by saying that she condemns the President’s actions while at the same time opening her arms by inviting him to come to this country. Surely she must send the clear message that he is not welcome here.

Amber Rudd: I do not accept that there are double standards. What I accept is that we have been totally consistent in ensuring that we call out hate crime and take aggressive action in order to stop it. That is why my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister responded so strongly to the tweet, and why other Cabinet Ministers have taken action as well. We will always ensure that we take action to stop the vile hate crime that sometimes takes place.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Has any member of the UK Government asked for these tweets to be taken down?

Amber Rudd: I shall have to come back to the hon. Lady on that.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Can the Home Secretary provide me with some guidance on how I should respond to residents in my incredibly diverse constituency when they ask me why our Government are affording someone with such abhorrent, vile, fascist, bigoted views the luxury of a state visit? If we do not take action today, when will we?

Amber Rudd: I ask the hon. Lady to refer her constituents—as I will refer mine—to the Prime Minister’s strong response. I also ask her to explain to them why the strong relationship with the US is so much in their interests, and to explain that action that we have shared with the intelligence services in the US helps to keep British people safe. We do not want to jeopardise any of that. The hon. Lady shakes her head, but this is an important point about keeping her constituents safe. That relationship is so critical to us that I would not want to harm it at all.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Surely the robust response that is required now is a withdrawal of the invitation.

Amber Rudd: The important step that we can take to stop the promulgation of the type of hate crime that has been promoted by Britain First, and by other extreme right-wing groups, is to work with the major internet companies to ensure that more action is taken. That is
exactly the area in which the UK has been leading internationally, and in which the Prime Minister has been leading at the recent United Nations conference. The whole House can rely on the Government to ensure that those companies deliver for us.

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) for submitting his urgent question, and I thank the Home Secretary and the shadow Home Secretary for being present on this important occasion. Let me also express my gratitude to all colleagues for participating in a very important set of exchanges.

Before I call the shadow Leader of the House to ask the business question, I should emphasise that there will be huge pressure on time from now on. There is to be an emergency debate under Standing Order 24 which can continue for up to three hours, and two debates are to be conducted under the auspices of the Backbench Business Committee. There is therefore a premium on short questions and short answers.
MONDAY 11 DECEMBER—Debate on e-petitions relating to the referendum on the EU's exit from the European Union.

THURSDAY 14 DECEMBER—Debate on the Home Affairs Committee report on asylum accommodation and the Government's response, followed by a debate on the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee report on HM Government's support for UK victims of IRA attacks that used Gaddafi-supplied Semtex and weapons and the Government's response.

I am sure the whole House will want to join me in marking World AIDS Day, which takes place tomorrow. Significant progress has been made in fighting HIV, but we must continue the work to end stigma, end HIV transmission and end the isolation experienced by people living with HIV for good.

As I have said many times, Scotland is much loved across the whole country. Both the UK Government and the UK Parliament are committed to championing Scotland and standing up for Scotland's interests, so may I take this opportunity to wish everyone, especially our friends north of the border, a very happy St Andrew's day?

Finally, may I add my sincere congratulations to Prince Harry and Meghan Markle on their engagement, and wish them all the very best for the future?

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for updating the House on the forthcoming business. Can she say when the Report stage and Third Reading of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill will come before the House, and will she publish the motion on restoration and renewal before Christmas? I am pleased to say that the subject of the Opposition-day debate will be universal credit.

I also wanted to thank Mr Speaker for granting the debate on Yemen, as one of the two hon. Members who were born in Yemen—the other being my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz). We have very happy memories of that country. One of the abiding memories at Christmas time was of Father Christmas arriving on a camel. In providing the debate, Mr Speaker has given the gift of life and hope to those suffering people in Yemen.

I thank the Leader of the House for indicating that the List of Ministers' Interests will be updated shortly. I am just not clear what the word "shortly" means. Section 7.5 of the ministerial code states that "a statement covering relevant Ministers' interests will be published twice yearly." That was honoured in 2016, but we have not seen anything yet.

The Leader of the House mentioned 22 December and wished everyone a merry Christmas, but will she ensure, by writing to all the Departments, that there will not be a plethora of statements published on 21 December? It would be difficult to put forward our constituents' views or to question Ministers then. There was an urgent question on the forensic services. The Minister described it as a serious matter. Indeed it is, but the written statement was published the day before the Budget.

Transparency and accountability are the watchwords of our democracy, so perhaps the Leader of the House will explain why there is no general "amendment to the law" resolution. There have been only five occasions when that has not happened at such a time. In 1929, it happened immediately before a general election. On the other occasions, in 1974, 1997, 2010 and July 2017, it happened immediately after a general election. "Erskine May" points out that:

"On occasions, and in particular when it has been necessary to proceed rapidly with a Finance Bill in anticipation of a dissolution of Parliament, the 'Amendment of the law' resolution has been omitted."

Will the Leader of the House update us on the Government’s thinking on why there is not a chance for the Opposition parties to put forward our alternative case? We have had listening chances before, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) found out when she tabled an amendment to the Finance Bill to ensure that the tampon tax was put through. This is about democracy. The Leader of the House and I have had a debate about how Parliament is being rigged. The Government have rigged Committees so that they have a majority on them, when they do not command one in Parliament.

Turning from treating Parliament with contempt to an actual contempt of the House, I know that people are not out on the streets of Northampton or Walsall chanting, “What do we want? Sectoral analysis. When do we want it? Now!” They have elected us to deal with that, and on behalf of those constituents, we want to see those sectoral analyses. The motion was very clear. It said that the impact assessments and the analyses of those 58 important sectors should be handed to the Select Committee on Exiting the European Union—we are not asking for them to be published—so that the Select Committee can look at them in private session, as Select Committees do all the time. That is what we want. How can the Committee possibly hold an inquiry without the evidence? Parliament is sovereign, as people often like to tell us, and the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union has to listen to Parliament. Our sovereign Parliament has instructed him to give up those papers.

The Leader of the House has alluded to a number of anniversaries. My hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) reminded us at Prime Minister’s Question Time that Sunday is disability day. I know that the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions is making a statement after business questions, and I hope that he will address the Government’s assertion that there is parity of esteem between physical conditions and mental health. A constituent of mine has been penalised in her personal independence payment assessment while her mother is going through cancer treatment. She may not get her PIP because of her mental health condition. Will the Leader of the House please ensure that there is parity of esteem in PIP assessments?

I hope the statement will also set out how the Government are dealing with errors in the payment of employment and support allowance, because 75,000 people have been affected but only 1,000 have been contacted. It is good that the Secretary of State is coming to the House, because the Chancellor’s financial statement—all 8,000 words of it—did not mention the words “disability” or “people with disabilities” once. People with disabilities and their families are set to lose £5,500 a year by 2022 because of existing tax and benefit changes. It was a flattening Budget from a flattening Government.
Tomorrow is World AIDS Day. Diana, Princess of Wales, did much to dispel the myths around AIDS and I echo the words of the Leader of the Opposition in congratulating her younger son, Prince Harry, and Meghan Markle on their engagement. It is fitting that they have chosen a visit to Nottingham Contemporary, a gallery that will be hosting a Terrence Higgins Trust World AIDS Day charity fair, as their first public event. We wish them as long and happy a life together as Prince Harry’s grandparents are celebrating, and we congratulate Prince Philip on his new honour as he and the Queen celebrate their 70 years together.

Finally, it is St Andrew’s day—one of the patron saints of our United Kingdom—and we wish everyone called Andrew a very happy day.

Andrea Leadsom: As ever, the hon. Lady raises a wide range of interesting and thought-provoking points. The Report stage and Third Reading of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill and the motion on restoration and renewal will be brought forward as soon as we can, but she will appreciate that it is not always possible to give notice so far in advance. Last week, she welcomed my announcing the business up until Christmas, and I will always seek to be as helpful as possible to the House, including in providing information on the future tabling of different items of business.

The hon. Lady said that the subject of the Opposition day would be universal credit. The Government welcome all views, and we have had several debates on this subject in recent weeks. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions was pleased to come to the House to address the motion that was passed by this House on universal credit, which I pledged would be the case whenever such a motion is passed by the House. He fulfilled that pledge within the 12-week timeframe, and I hope that hon. Members noted that. I look forward to this further debate.

I share the hon. Lady’s enthusiasm for discussing the plight of those living in Yemen in these terrible times, and we are all looking forward to the emergency debate later today.

I cannot give the hon. Lady a specific date, but the register of Ministers’ interests will be provided as soon as possible. I cannot give her a specific date. Quite a lot of work needs to be done to compile and finalise the register, and it will be provided just as soon as we can.

The hon. Lady asked us to avoid making written ministerial statements on 21 December. Ministers obviously come under criticism for publishing anything outside of sitting days, but she now wants to criticise the Government for publishing things on sitting days. I do not think we can accept that sitting days should be ring-fenced simply because we are drawing near to the end of a sitting period, and she needs to bear in mind that Ministers make great efforts to ensure that announcements are made while the House is sitting, giving the House the opportunity to consider them.

The hon. Lady made a point about the Opposition’s ability to put forward an alternative case on the Finance Bill. I will write to her on that point, if I may, because I am actually looking into the matter at the moment.

The hon. Lady suggests that no one in her constituency or mine is walking about demanding Brexit impact assessments, but I think she underestimates the good people of Northamptonshire—Victoria Prentis, who is my PPS, and I are clear that our constituents are interested. The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union and his ministerial team have been clear that the analysis was not a series of impact assessments examining what exiting the EU would mean for the 58 sectors. In order to satisfy the motion of 1 November, we have taken a lot of time to bring together the sectoral analyses in a way that is accessible and informative for the Exiting the European Union Committee. The analyses are being made available to all Members of both the House of Commons and the House of Lords in a private reading room, and the Secretary of State will meet the Select Committee on Wednesday 6 December.

Finally, the hon. Lady raised the important issue of parity of esteem for mental and physical disability. I absolutely share her determination that we should achieve that, and it is the goal and intention of the Government. I am sure that she, like me, will welcome the fact that spending on disability has increased by £7 billion since 2010. This Government are determined to enable people with disabilities to have more control over their lives and to seek work that suits their capabilities to give them the chance to improve their own lives as far as possible.
you and all hon. Ladies and Gentlemen a happy St Andrew’s day, and lang may yer lum reek—there’s a challenge for Hansard.

The Scottish National party has now joined an exclusive club with all the Opposition parties, which the Government will not vote against. Thanks to the Tory vote refuseniks, we now have unanimous agreement in this House to tackle WASPI injustice. We were wondering what type of motion might tempt the Tory vote-phony loops into the Division Lobby. Given the childish nature of their failure to participate in the democratic structures of the House, maybe a motion that “This Government smells,” might tempt them into the Division Lobby to try to preserve their dignity.

This situation will not end well for the Government, and I know that Mr Speaker is considering my correspondence to the effect that the Government may be in contempt of the House following their failure fully to comply with an earlier binding motion. Mr Speaker has been typically generous with the Government, but his patience must be running thin. It is either compliance or contempt, and we must return the House to a position in which this Government vote. This is a national Parliament, a sovereign Parliament; it is not a sixth-form debating society.

Lastly, the latest piece of Brexit chaotic cluelessness comes in the form of a £50 billion repayment bill. It has apparently gone from “go whistle” to “what’s your sort code?” The total bill to the United Kingdom of leaving the European Union because of this Brexit madness must now come close to hundreds of billions of pounds. That is why we must see these Brexit sectoral impact assessments. We need a proper debate about the true cost of Brexit, and we need to hear whether there is any price that would make the Government think again.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his feisty remarks. I was going to invite him for a bit of haggis, neeps and tatties in the Members’ Tea Room after business questions, but I might think again as he now feels the Government smell—I am not sure that is even orderly language. Nevertheless, I am willing to overlook it.

The hon. Gentleman mentions the specific issue of the pension age for women. Of course he will be aware that this issue has been raised on a number of occasions. The Conservatives in government have committed more than £1 billion to support those affected so that no woman will see her pension age change by more than 18 months compared with the Pensions Act 1995 timetable. He will recognise that the great news that we are all living longer means that the age at which people reach their state retirement and therefore draw their state pension needs to change with it. We are seeking fairness between men and women in that regard.

The hon. Gentleman asks about voting. As I made very clear in my previous statement, we recognise that any motion voted on by the House is binding on the House. Opposition day motions that are voted on and approved are binding on the House. However, as Mr Speaker has made clear, they are not binding on the Government. What I have agreed, in recognition of the House’s desire, quite rightly, to see what actions are taken as a result of motions approved by the House, is that a statement will be provided in respect of any Opposition day motion passed by the House, with a Minister explaining exactly what actions have been taken as a result. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions came before this House to provide such an update only this week, and further statements will be made in the near future.

As the hon. Gentleman will know, his final point about the cost of leaving the EU is not at all something the Government have said is the case; it is simply something that is part of the negotiations. The Government are committed to seeking the best possible deal for the UK as we leave the EU. The negotiations are in a positive phase and we hope to see some good, constructive results from the December Council. We all await those negotiations with enormous interest.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): May we have a debate on the importance and value of further education and skills, especially following the disgraceful attack, yet again, by the former chief inspector of schools, Michael Wilshaw, who told FE colleges to “get off their backsides”. That is entirely wrong, as 70% of our FE colleges are good or outstanding. He has previously said that FE is a Cinderella sector, but it is worth remembering not only that Cinderella married a prince, but that we have to banish the two ugly sisters of snobbery and intolerance.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend is a fantastic champion for young people getting on in life, and I absolutely share his enthusiasm for the contribution of so many excellent FE colleges in giving young people the opportunities they need and deserve.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement, and may I quickly point out to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) that having a reekie lum is in contravention of the Clean Air Acts?

This afternoon, we have two important debates scheduled by the Backbench Business Committee, one on the treatment of small and medium-sized enterprises by RBS Global Restructuring Group and the other on mental health and suicide within the autism community. As a result of an almost exceptional set of circumstances far beyond the control of the Backbench Business Committee, these two important debates will be severely restricted and squeezed for time. In both debates, there will be public support here on site, with constituents visiting this place to witness their very real concerns being debated. May we now look at a potential revision of Standing Orders to enable some measure of protected time for such debates for the Backbench Business Committee in the future? Our constituents, and the constituents of all Back Benchers, deserve that at least.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important point. I think we are all disappointed to see the constraints that have arisen, through no individual fault but just as a result of circumstances, on the two important debates he mentions. I will certainly take away the point he makes and look at it.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I want the Government to make a statement on how they are going to involve leaseholders in the discussions on high-rise buildings with cladding. The Department for Communities and Local Government is having meetings with the managing agents and others, but leaseholders,
who may be isolated, are not being brought in and not being brought together. Would it be possible for the Leader of the House to consider asking that Department whether it could announce, before next Tuesday, how it is going to get leaseholders involved and how the leaseholders can talk to each other, so that they have a united front and share information?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises something that is very important to all of us: ensuring the safety of those who live in high-rise buildings. If he would like to write to me or talk to me after business questions, I will certainly see whether I can help to raise this matter with that Department.

Sir Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): May we have an urgent debate on shale gas fracking planning applications? In my constituency, INEOS, a multinational petrochemical company, has applied to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government to avoid local democracy by taking planning decisions out of the local council’s hands and giving it to the national Planning Inspectorate. I would like to ask that Secretary of State how that fits with the Tory manifesto he has just fought on, which promised to “maintain public confidence” in the shale gas industry and “uphold our rigorous environmental protections”?

Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Gentleman might wish to raise that specific question in DCLG oral questions on 4 December. As he will know, however, the subject of shale gas exploration has received a huge amount of attention in this place and the regulations are very strong. It is right that the UK economy takes the opportunity to benefit from the transition from high carbon emitting coal, through lower carbon emitting gas, to the renewables future we all want to see.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): May we have a debate on a weed called floating pennywort? It is a strong contender for the worst aquatic weed in the UK and it is affecting large stretches of the Thames, including around Henley. A debate would allow us to sort out how to deal with it.

Andrea Leadsom: I agree with my hon. Friend that floating pennywort is a highly invasive non-native species that has a significant environmental impact. The Environment Agency has removed thousands of tonnes of this plant as part of a co-ordinated programme of removal and spraying to control its growth. My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that the EA redoubled its efforts to remove floating pennywort from the Thames and its tributaries throughout October and November and is putting in place a spraying, removal and monitoring programme from spring 2018.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): This Saturday, I will be taking part in Small Business Saturday, visiting businesses on Deptford High Street and Ladywell Christmas market, and finishing with a drink in Lewisham’s new bar, Suttons Radio. May we have a debate on the support the Government can provide to help small businesses to thrive and grow?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to highlight her local small businesses and their important value to the local economy. The Government enormously support small businesses and the contribution they make right across the United Kingdom. I am sure that many Members will be doing something similar to the hon. Lady and visiting their own local small businesses, and I encourage them all to do so.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Yesterday saw the long-awaited publication by the Labour Mayor of London of the draft London plan. It could lead to the end of back gardens in suburbia and the abolition of car-parking spaces in all new developments. At the same time, not a single new affordable home has been built on his watch. The plan will affect all Londoners, so may we have a debate in Government time on the drastic impact it will have throughout London?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to hold the Labour Mayor of London to account in the way that he does, and to point out that we do need thriving economies. London absolutely needs much more housing, affordable housing and greater infrastructure. Unfortunately, the Mayor all too often criticises central Government for his own failings.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): There was absolute astonishment from MPs at all parties at the fact that the Chancellor made no mention of defence in his Budget. Given the crisis that defence in this country is currently facing, will the Leader of the House ask the Chancellor to come to the House and explain how we are going to stop cuts to the numbers of soldiers, aircraft and Marines, so that we can defend our country properly?

Andrea Leadsom: First and foremost, the Government support all our armed forces and our defence sector to an enormous extent. We have committed to meet our NATO pledge to spend 2% of GDP on defence every year until 2022 and we plan to spend £178 billion on our equipment plan between 2016 and 2026. By 2025, we will have a highly capable expeditionary force of around 50,000, up from 30,000. It is important that we look at how our defence needs are changing. That review is vital to this country’s future security needs.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Earlier this week, the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy made an excellent statement to introduce the industrial strategy, many strands of which will be of particular benefit to constituencies such as mine, Cleethorpes. Do the Government have any plans to debate in Government time the various aspects of the strategy, particularly the teacher development premium, which will be of great value in my area?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is a great champion for his constituency. I agree that we should all welcome the industrial strategy, which sets out how we are building a Britain fit for the future and how we will help businesses to create better, higher-paying jobs, with investment in the skills, industries and infrastructure that will make Britain an enormous success in the years to come.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Only 10% of children on free school meals in Barnsley go on to university. Can we have a debate in Government time
about social mobility in Britain, as our future economic success depends on all children having the opportunities to succeed?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that children are the future and that we need to do everything we can to support them. Making their lives better than those of the generation before is our aspiration. I am sure that she welcomes the fact, as we all do, that there are now 1.8 million more children in good and outstanding schools than there were in 2010, and that there are more than 3.4 million apprenticeships for young people since 2010. It is absolutely vital that we do everything we can to support their future as we move into this enormous industrial change that gives us the opportunity to build the industries of the future.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I do not know whether the Leader of the House has seen the migration figures today, but net migration is a third lower in the past year than it was before the EU referendum. Can we have a debate in Government time on immigration, so that we can talk about the Government’s progress towards the target of tens of thousands, and the fact that we will be able to reach it when we come out of the EU and end free movement?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is right to raise the importance of immigration in this country both in terms of the enormous contribution made by those who have come here to live and make their lives here, and the pressure that high and uncontrolled immigration has wrought on some of our public services. Yes, I absolutely encourage him to seek a Westminster Hall debate so that we can discuss the relative merits of uncontrolled versus controlled migration.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): Less than 48 hours ago, the Palmer and Harvey company went into administration, which means hundreds of job losses in my constituency just weeks before Christmas. Like something from a Dickens novel, workers found out when they arrived for their shift and saw the gates shut. Despite that, the administrator, PwC, has not responded to multiple attempts by me to contact it. Will the Leader of the House ask the Business Secretary to intervene to support me and the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers in trying to find out what is going on and what can be done to help my constituents?

Andrea Leadsom: I am very sorry to hear about that. If the hon. Gentleman writes to me, I will be very happy to take it up with the Business Secretary.

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): I recently had the honour of becoming patron of the Mary Ann Evans Hospice, which is a charitably funded hospice that provides really valuable services to my constituents and reduces pressure on the NHS. The hospice has made me aware of funding challenges that it and many others face, so can we have an urgent debate on the options available for hospices to make it easier for them to apply for NHS funding?

Andrea Leadsom: Huge congratulations to my hon. Friend on his new role. Hospices right around the country, including Cynthia Spencer Hospice and Catherine House that serve my own constituents so well, deliver excellent care and contribute to the well-being of their local communities. Millions of families benefit from them. I am sure that I can speak for all Members when I say how grateful we are to them. NHS England has developed a new payment system for end-of-life care, which is designed to be fairer and more transparent, and that will further improve care for patients.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call Alison Thewliss.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Gosh, I was not expecting to be called so soon. Can we have a debate, please, in Government time, on the postcode lottery of asylum appeals? Some 28% were successful in Glasgow, compared with 47% at the Taylor House centre in London. My constituents deserve a fair hearing when they go for their asylum tribunals.

Andrea Leadsom: I completely agree that all asylum appeals should be treated with equal importance and respect. If the hon. Lady wishes to seek an Adjournment debate on the specific concern that she has in her own constituency, then that would be viewed very favourably by Mr Speaker.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): Further to the question of my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), who is leaving the Chamber, will my right hon. Friend grant time for a debate on the importance of improved productivity for the growth of the economy in the United Kingdom?

Andrea Leadsom: I know that my hon. Friend, who is a former teacher, is a huge advocate of developing the skills of young people. I share his enthusiasm for our new industrial strategy that sets out how we will build a Britain fit for the future and ready to take advantage of the extraordinary advances in technology that can really transform lives for the better.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): The Leader of the House might remember that my first question to her, back in June, was about gun crime and police cuts, following 10 such incidents in my constituency that month. It has not gone unnoticed that there was no mention of police cuts continuing in the Budget last week. More and more of my constituents are raising crime and fear of crime as one of the blights on their lives, and Merseyside police are stretched to the limits, having lost 1,000 police officers and £100 million a year from their budget. The situation, as is, is unsustainable. We need a debate in Government time on police cuts and the effects of crime in our constituencies.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a serious issue, and of course we know that the fear of crime is widespread around the country, but I am sure he will be pleased to know that the rate for crimes traditionally measured by the independent crime survey for England and Wales has fallen by 9% over the last year, which is a continuation of the overall downward trend. He should also be reassured to know that we are protecting police budgets in real terms and that the proportion of officers in frontline roles has increased since 2010 to over 93% now. There are, of course, individual issues in particular
policing areas, however, and if he feels that that is the case in his area, I would encourage him to raise the matter through an Adjournment debate.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I am sure that, like me, the Leader of the House has been inundated with emails about animal sentience. Many constituents have contacted me following an email from the lobbying company 38 Degrees that sadly contained many mistruths about a vote in the House. Through my office, I have requested a correction, but will she advise me on how I and other Members can combat fake news and misinformation when it is passed on to our constituents directly from such sources?

Andrea Leadsom: Yes, my hon. Friend is quite right to raise this issue. Matters of concern to the public must always be raised with us, but groups such as 38 Degrees should not, whether inadvertently or maliciously, spread information that is just not true, and when something is proven not to be true, as in this case, it should be immediately withdrawn or corrected. We are very aware of the concerns around fake news, and as part of our manifesto commitment, work is under way through the digital charter to make sure that high-quality news online has a sustainable future and that we have an accurate news environment.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The Leader of the House will be aware that over the last three weeks I have made two speeches about the impact on me of bullying in school. Since those speeches, I have been inundated by adults and children in school saying that they are under constant attack through cyber-bullying. Will she find Government time for a debate about the impact of Facebook, Twitter and Instagram on bullying and young people’s lives and wellbeing?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise this point. Bullying, and cyber-bullying in particular, are a real scourge of modern life, particularly for young people, and I certainly would welcome his seeking a Westminster Hall debate on the subject. He might be aware that a Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee inquiry will be looking into this issue. He might want to respond to that.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): A growing number of companies around the UK are seeing the value of installing energy efficiency measures and clean tech in their premises. On the refurbishment of this place, will the Leader of the House use her influence to ensure that we set the very highest standards for energy efficiency and the deployment of clean tech so that we can lead by example, reduce costs and showcase the very best of British clean technologies for export around the world?

Andrea Leadsom: I absolutely share my hon. Friend’s enthusiasm for clean technology and reducing our carbon footprint—I am sure that the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) shares that enthusiasm—and can assure him that throughout the R and R process, as we seek to restore this beautiful palace, we will take advantage of the opportunities to reduce its carbon footprint.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Can we have debate or statement, or—better still—will the Leader of the House have a word with the Work and Pensions Secretary, about HSBC’s pension clawback? Employees in HSBC Midland Bank’s defined benefit occupational pension scheme believe that they were not adequately made aware of the clawback feature. Clawback reduces the bank’s pension contribution when the basic state pension becomes available. This means that many staff were denied the opportunity to make additional financial plans for their retirement. Other banks have not applied, or have since withdrawn, this scheme. Will she do all she can to help us with this situation?

Andrea Leadsom: This issue has been raised before in business questions, and a couple of constituents have also contacted me about it. It is a matter of concern that needs to be looked into, and I encourage the hon. Gentleman to seek an Adjournment debate.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I thank the Leader of the House for her St Andrew’s day greeting. Does her offer of haggis, tatties and neeps in the Tea Room apply to her Scottish Conservative colleagues?

The gulf between the tax paid by Scots and the tax paid by people in the rest of the UK looks set to widen further when the Scottish Government unveil their budget plans on 14 December. Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the hugely damaging consequences of such a tax hike for Scotland? After last week’s Budget boosted the Scottish Government by £2 billion over the next three years, the Scottish Government need to explain why they think that raising income tax is justified.

Andrea Leadsom: I am always delighted to meet my hon. Friend and our other hon. Friends from Scotland at any time. Income tax powers were an important part of the Smith Commission’s recommendations and we have devolved them through the Scotland Act 2016. How the Scottish Government choose to use those powers is a decision for them. However, I completely agree with my hon. Friend; I do not see how making Scotland the highest taxed part of the UK can be the right thing to do. I cannot see why the Scottish National party would choose to drive away growth and talent. Let us be clear that income tax is not the Government’s money. It is money that has been earned by the people of this country. That is why the Conservatives in Westminster and in Holyrood will always stand up for low taxes.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please give me an approximate time that one should wait for a response from the Prime Minister to a letter signed by 111 MPs regarding the important economic contribution of international students in the UK, particularly in our regions and with regard to the industrial strategy? Is that the sort of thing to apply for a debate on, given its cross-party support?

Andrea Leadsom: If the matter carries cross-party support, as the hon. Lady suggests, it is most certainly a candidate for a Westminster Hall or a BackBench Business debate. With regards to the question about the time that it will take for the Prime Minister to respond to the
letter, I can forward the hon. Lady’s request to the
Prime Minister if she would like to take this up with me
by email.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I add my voice to
another matter that commands cross-party support: the
importance of small businesses and Small Business
Saturday, when I will be visiting businesses in my
constituency of Redditch. We have a number of successful
ones, including Astwood Carpentry and the Inn Plaice
in Headless Cross, which has the best fish and chips.
Can the Leader of the House find the time for a debate
in Government time on the importance of keeping taxes
on small businesses low?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is a great advocate
for her constituency of Redditch. All this talk of food is
making us all hungry. Small Business Saturday is a
grassroots, non-commercial campaign that highlights
small business successes, and encourages consumers to
shop locally and support small businesses, which is
something that everyone across this House seeks to do.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP):
May I actually congratulate the Government—and the
Scottish Government, just to make that clear—on
something that they have done this week? There has
been a change in blood donation rules for gay and
bisexual men, as the ban has come down from 12 months
to three months. That now means that thousands more
gay men can give blood than could previously. But can
we have a statement on this? The excellent news does
not seem to have caught the attention of the media this
week, and we need to discuss how we can make it much
more widely known to encourage people to donate
blood.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman has just made
sure that this news will receive some media attention,
and I congratulate him on doing so. He raises the
matter of a valuable and important contribution to the
country’s blood stocks. I am sure that many who were
previously unaware of the news will be delighted.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker,
may I also wish you and the whole House a very happy
St Andrew’s day?

Can we have a debate on the excellent decision by the
UK Government to bypass the failing SNP Scottish
Government for the next roll-out of broadband? Does
my right hon. Friend share my bemusement at the
reaction of Scotland’s First Minister, who has suggested
that Scottish Conservative MPs and even the Scottish
media have been misleading on this issue? Does my
right hon. Friend agree that Nicola Sturgeon should
stop burying her head on this issue, and actually start
burying some connections so that my Moray constituents
and many across Scotland can get the broadband speeds
deserve?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend’s priorities are
always in the right place: looking after his constituents.
In September 2017, we announced wave one of the local
full fibre networks programme in six locations across
the UK, including Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire. In
parallel to this announcement, we have written to all
local councils seeking expressions of interest, and there
were more than 130 responses. My hon. Friend is absolutely
right. The programme is intended to achieve better and
faster broadband roll-out for all the people of Scotland,
including his constituents.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab):
When the Science Museum said that Hull could not
have Amy Johnson’s plane, Jason, for the city of culture
celebrations this year, local artist Leonard J Brown
worked with inmates at Hull Prison to create a replica,
which is now in Hull Paragon station. Can we please
have a statement from the Ministry of Justice on why it
has now decided that that plane, which means so much
to the city, is going to be moved down the road to York
without asking the artist or key players in Hull about its
future?

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate Hull on the excellent
work it has done as the current city of culture; I
understand that the local economy has benefited from
more than £3 billion of investment from Hull’s role. It is
an amazing achievement. I suggest that the hon. Lady
looks into having a Westminster Hall debate to raise
this point with the relevant Minister.
Work, Health and Disability

12.17 pm

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mr David Gauke): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the Command Paper being published today by my Department and the Department of Health.

Good work promotes good health. It enables people to be economically independent, and gives them more choices and opportunities to fulfil other ambitions in life. A country that works for everyone needs to ensure that all who can work or undertake meaningful activity have the chance to do so, and that the right care and support is in place to enable all to thrive in work throughout their lives. Our labour market is in its strongest position for years, with the United Kingdom’s employment rate at a near historic high of 75% and around 600,000 more disabled people in work than four years ago. Despite this, only around half of disabled people are in work, but many disabled people and people with health conditions can and want to work. That means that too many people are missing the opportunity to develop their talents and connect with the world of work, and the range of positive impacts that come from doing so, including good health and social outcomes. That is why it is important that we act now.

With around one in six working-age adults reporting a disability, it is clear that health and disability issues affect the working lives of millions of people. The majority of long-term health conditions are acquired in adulthood, and inclusive workplaces are imperative in an ageing population. That is why in our manifesto, the Government pledged to see 1 million more disabled adults in work by 2020 when compared to 2010, and to increase to 75% the employment rate at a near historic high of 75% and around 600,000 more disabled people in work than four years ago. Despite this, only around half of disabled people are in work, but many disabled people and people with health conditions can and want to work. That means that too many people are missing the opportunity to develop their talents and connect with the world of work, and the range of positive impacts that come from doing so, including good health and social outcomes. That is why it is important that we act now.

Last year, we published “Improving Lives: The Work, Health and Disability Green Paper”, which set out the Government’s new and ambitious approach to the issue and marked the start of a new era in joint working between the welfare and health systems. Our 15-week consultation on the next 10 years of reform sought input from disabled people and those with health conditions, their families, employers and a range of stakeholders. The consultation was supported by 166 accessible events, and received around 6,000 responses. Today, we are publishing “Improving Lives: the Future of Work, Health and Disability”, setting out our responses to the Green Paper consultation, as well as the next steps we will take to deliver our vision.

Changes in the nature of work, and more flexible working models, benefit a wider range of people, and new advances in technology offer more opportunities than ever before. For example, accessible hardware and software, and developments in apps and wearable technology, make it easier for employers to offer flexibility and adaptations to their staff. Small businesses and large employers alike are already implementing these solutions for their employees, and it is for Government to help set the direction and stimulate good ideas.

We know that the barriers to moving into work and staying in work are different for each person, depending on the nature of their health condition or disability, their aspirations and their individual circumstances. We need to work directly with people who experience these barriers to identify solutions that will work. We want to build an approach that is responsive and caters for every scenario, with the individual at its heart.

The change needed is not one that the Government can deliver on their own. Across the country, there are striking examples of what can be achieved when employers, charities and healthcare professionals work together locally, but Government can help create the conditions for success.

In the workplace, employers should have the confidence to recruit and retain disabled people and those with health conditions, and to create healthy and inclusive workplaces where all employees can thrive and progress. The best employers have already realised the business benefits of hiring disabled people, and while there are many examples of good practice, we want to go further.

This Command Paper responds to what we heard in the consultation and to the findings of “Thriving at work: The Stevenson/Farmer review of mental health and employers”. We will improve advice and support for employers of all sizes, working in partnership with them, together with disabled people and other stakeholders, to bring together information and advice that meet businesses’ needs. We will also make significant enhancements to the Access to Work scheme, including by increasing the capacity of its mental health support service.

To support a key recommendation of the Stevenson/Farmer review, we will establish a voluntary framework approach for large employers to report on mental health and disability within their workforce. We are also preparing a consultation on changes to statutory sick pay, and we will run a cross-Government programme of analysis and research to examine the incentives and expectations that influence employers’ decisions in this area. We will report back on the preliminary work next year.

We will build on the key role that the welfare system plays in supporting disabled people and those with health conditions to enter work where possible, by developing a more personalised and tailored approach to employment support. We will continue to learn, for example, through voluntary trials to help us build an effective offer of support that meets the needs of those in the support group. We will also continue to improve the assessment process, while building our evidence base, including by working with external stakeholders to take forward reform of the work capability assessment.

Health and care professionals are vital to supporting disabled people and those with health conditions to achieve their employment potential. We will work with and support health professionals with the tools and techniques they need to have supportive conversations with patients about work and health. We are doubling the number of work and health champions and investing about £39 million to more than double the number of employment advisers in improving access to psychological therapies services. We will also conduct large-scale randomised controlled trials delivering employment support in a health setting in the west midlands and the Sheffield city region, beginning by March 2018.

Alongside this Command Paper, I am also announcing the next steps for the Fit for Work service. Established in December 2014, it offers general health and work
advice to employees, employers and GPs through a phone line, a webchat service and a website. Since 2015 it has also provided occupational health assessments for employees at risk of long-term sickness absence, with advice on how they can be supported to return to work and remain in employment.

However, referrals of cases to the service by employers and GPs have been much lower than expected. For instance, there have been only 650 referrals a month in England and Wales, compared with the estimated 4,200. By contrast, use of the advice line, webchats and Fit for Work website has exceeded expectations. I am therefore ending the contracts for the provision of the assessments service in England and Wales and in Scotland, while ensuring continued access to the Fit for Work online and phone services, which will continue to offer general health and work advice as well as support on sickness absence.

The Government are also announcing the appointment of an expert working group on occupational health to champion and drive a programme of work, taking an in-depth look at the sector.

To inform policy development, we have commissioned research to better understand current market supply and the delivery of occupational health provision. This research will look at local partnership models to integrate health and wider support, and it will report in 2019. We will also take account of the lessons from the Fit for Work service as we move forward.

The Government are laying the foundations for a 10-year programme of change. Everyone has their own part to play to achieve this ambitious vision of a society in which all disabled people and people with long-term health and wider support, and it will report in 2019. We will also take account of the lessons from the Fit for Work service as we move forward.

The Government are laying the foundations for a 10-year programme of change. Everyone has their own part to play to achieve this ambitious vision of a society in which all disabled people and people with long-term health conditions are able to go as far as their talents will take them. I commend this statement to the House.

12.25 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): Let me begin by giving apologies from the shadow Secretary of State, who is unable to be here today.

It is welcome that the Government have finally brought this statement before the House. We have waited years since the Work and Health programme was first proposed, with the Green Paper published a year ago and the consultation closing in February. The programme was initially supposed to be launched this autumn.

During the long wait, the Government have dropped the ambition to halve the disability employment gap by 2020. Sadly, today’s statement reflects only the weaker ambition set out in their recent manifesto, reducing the number of disabled people and people with long-term health conditions are able to go as far as their talents will take them. I commend this statement to the House.

That is the reason for the Government’s strategy suddenly needing 10 years. They had promised to halve the disability employment gap by 2020; now it seems they promise to not halve it by 2027. The Government handing themselves an extended deadline to meet a weaker target will be very familiar to anyone who watched the Budget last week.

No doubt due to the Government’s new, relaxed approach, today’s announcement offers little in the way of commitments. It is, sadly, an attempt to kick the issue back into the long grass, with vague statements on pilots, a commitment from the Government to carry on doing what they are currently doing, and some minuscule sums for investment in training. This does not go nearly far enough.

There is a wealth of evidence about what support is necessary to deliver labour market outcomes for disabled people. Why do the Government need to do another round of pilots? We know, for example, that Access to Work is popular among those who use it, focused on the vital issue of retention for those in work, and effective in its results. Yet Inclusion London reports that, instead of expanding the scheme, the direction of travel from the Government has been to reduce the value of Access to Work packages. Will the Secretary of State commit now to expanding the funding for the programme as part of the wider Work and Health initiative, rather than simply saying that the Government will look at enhancements? The evidence has been available for years.

The statement instead praises the Government’s existing Disability Confident programme, yet produces no evidence of concrete results from it. Can the Minister confirm how many additional disabled people have found work as a direct result of the programme? Can he also confirm how much Government money has been spent on Disability Confident per additional person employed as a result of the programme? I suspect he cannot. Once again, we see the Government talking a good game but delivering nothing beyond warm words.

Of course, we welcome the vague nod to a reformed statutory sick pay, although the devil will surely be in the detail of that announcement. Yet another consultation will have to keep us content for the time being. The Government clearly like to listen; it is taking action that they find much more difficult. When will the Secretary of State bring forward details of the consultation, including a timeline for action?

The Government propose to publish a report on local partnership and better integration of health and wider support, but we will have to wait until 2019 for it—two years into their 10-year strategy, and only a year before the 2020 deadline for halving the disability employment gap. That simply is not good enough.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you will remember that when the Government cut £1,500 a year from disabled people by slashing the employment and support allowance, that was justified as being for the sake of an effective Work and Health programme. Today’s statement is clear evidence that they have broken that promise. I hope that Government Members will recognise that this is not what they were promised, and work with the Labour party to demand a stronger programme of support for disabled people. Should the Government be unable to deliver that, they should stand aside and let the Labour party get on with the job.
Mr Gauke: It is important that we all seek to remove barriers to work and to increase opportunities for disabled people to get into work. I think we should have a constructive debate on that shared objective, and I will take that contribution as a constructive contribution, even though it did not always sound quite like it.

May I pick up one or two points in what the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) said? Let us be clear: what has actually happened over the past four years is that the number of disabled people in work has increased by 600,000. To go now from 3.5 million disabled people in work to 4.5 million people in work over the course of the decade is an ambitious objective; it will require a great deal of work. I hope there can be a constructive debate in delivering that. I welcome the Mayor of London’s remarks this morning, in the context of the Work and Health programme in London, in which he recognised what we have done and said it was time to put party politics aside on this matter. I hope that we can maintain that spirit across the board.

Let us remember what we are already delivering. The hon. Lady refers to Access to Work. Well, the budget of Access to Work—the expenditure of Access to Work—increased by 8% last year. We have in place the personal support package, helping people, where we are spending £330 million over the next four years. Let me be clear as to how we approach this. We recognise that there will be some disabled people and people with health conditions who will not be able to work, and we need to continue to support them—it is worth noting that we spend record amounts on benefits for disabled people. However, there are also very many people who want to work, and we are determined to do everything we can to support them, whether that is by using our capabilities in the welfare system and the health system or working with employers, because we want to put work at the centre of this.

Work matters. It should be at the heart of what we do in delivering a welfare system. That is exactly what this Government do across the board. I can draw a parallel in delivering a welfare system. That is exactly what this Government have done. I thank my right hon. Friend for her address as a society.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): May I first welcome this 10-year plan? I am delighted that the Secretary of State and the Department continue to focus on this area. He knows that I have campaigned for many years to improve the life chances of people with autism, but sadly still only 16% of adults with autism are in full-time employment, and only 32% in full-time or part-time employment, and that percentage has not really shifted much in a decade. I pay tribute to the Secretary of State for International Development, to whom I presented, on 21 February, when she was a Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton), has spoken to Scottish Government Ministers today and got a much more constructive response. It is the launch of the innovation fund for the Dundee gateway today and we look forward to working closely with the Scottish Government in a constructive manner.

We have consulted on the work capability assessment. It is not clear that there is consensus at this point as to the way in which the work capability assessment should be reformed, but we acknowledge that there are improvements that should be made. We have indeed made improvements in how the work capability assessment works; for example, those with severe long-term disabilities will not be reassessed in the way that they were previously. So we continue to make improvements on that. If we can reach consensus on the way in which the work capability assessment should be reformed, I will be happy to proceed with that.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I strongly welcome the statement that the Secretary of State has made this afternoon. I also welcome the news that the disability employment rate has risen by nearly 5% since 2014. The Government are obviously a major employer of people. What are the Government doing to ensure that the civil service leads by example in this area?

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance notice of the statement.

The SNP is extremely disappointed in the statement and the Command Paper that have been produced today. We believe that the UK Government, as a priority, need to reverse the cuts they have made to these benefits and need to scrap the freeze on benefits, because they are harming people.

The Disability Benefits Consortium has said:

“We are alarmed that the needs of hundreds of thousands of people with mild or moderate learning disabilities have been overlooked.”

The Government seem to have abandoned their pledge to halve the disability employment gap, and the gap is even worse for those people who have learning disabilities.

Mr Gauke: First, in response to the hon. Lady’s comments on behalf of the SNP, I know that the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton), has spoken to Scottish Government Ministers today and got a much more constructive response. It is the launch of the innovation fund for the Dundee gateway today and we look forward to working closely with the Scottish Government in a constructive manner.

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She published a very good report on the issue and we are studying its contents closely. She highlights this issue. That is the challenge: we have made progress across the board, but is there more to do? Absolutely; there is more to do. She highlights the employment gap for those with autism. That is something that we do have to address as a society.

Mr Gauke: I thank my right hon. Friend for her question and pay tribute to the work that she does on autism, including the work that she has done for many years now as chair of the all-party autism group. Yesterday
Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend makes a good point. The Government are a large employer. I am pleased to say that all Government Departments are Disability Confident employers. One of the points that we make in the Command Paper is that, as an employer, it is important that the civil service leads by example in terms of how it operates and the support that is provided to disabled people.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his statement and welcome the passage in which it sounds as though he will introduce significant improvements to the Access to Work programme. Does that include abolishing or raising the cap on support for deaf people that was introduced in March 2015?

Mr Gauke: We continue to review that matter. We have certainly received representations on that point, and we continue to look at the evidence.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): My father was made disabled at work. When that happens to someone, it can really affect their life chances. I congratulate Microlink, a company in Chandler’s Ford that has been going for more than 23 years, which enables people with certain conditions and disabilities to get back into education or employment by helping them with the challenges that they face. Will the Secretary of State undertake to listen to such companies, which do so much to keep people in work and education and give them opportunities at every point in life?

Mr Gauke: I praise the employer in my hon. Friend’s constituency. Very good employers lead the way. There are now 5,000 employers signed up to the Disability Confident scheme, and we want to ensure that the best practice that is pursued by many employers is pursued by all employers.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The Secretary of State will be aware of evidence presented to the Select Committee about individuals’ frustration with the Minicom service and text relay operators. It is not acceptable for people to wait 45 or 50 minutes to access those services, or to be hung up on. Can he assure me that the Minicom service and text relay operators will be adequately staffed?

Mr Gauke: We are always looking at what we can do to improve the service that is provided. When the standard falls below an acceptable level, something clearly needs to be rectified.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the statement. I am sure the Secretary of State agrees that, particularly when it comes to mental health, we need to tackle the taboos that may prevent people from accessing help when they first think that there may be an issue. Will he make that a key part of his strategy, to help to keep people in work and make employers more confident about employing people who have a history of mental health issues?

Mr Gauke: There has clearly been a very welcome change in attitudes in respect of mental health in recent years. We need that sort of cultural shift more broadly in the recognition and understanding of disabilities or health conditions that may have held people back in the past, but can be dealt with and accommodated. Employers can take steps and put in place adaptations to enable people to continue to work, as the Command Paper argues strongly.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State start a specific job of work looking at support for people with acquired brain injuries, whether they result from concussion in sport, which might lead to chronic traumatic encephalopathy, or from other injuries sustained in, for example, a car accident? The truth of the matter is that we do not have anywhere near enough rehabilitation units around the country. Rehabilitation can get people right the way to cure and get them back into work, and it is immensely cost-effective for the Government. I urge him to meet the brand new all-party group on acquired brain injury, which I chair, and to look specifically at this job of work so that we can get those people the real-life opportunities that they need.

Mr Gauke: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point, and I know that the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work is particularly keen to meet him in his capacity as chair of the all-party group to discuss the issue further.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I wonder whether the Minister or other Members watched the programme “Employable Me” on BBC2 the other night. When I watched it, I was struck by the courage of the disabled people who were very keen to get back into work but faced insuperable challenges, and by the enlightened employers who gave them a chance. It demonstrated the life-enhancing power of work for people who make a positive choice to work and who are supported. Will the Minister think about how difficult it is for small businesses and charities, which featured in the programme, to give the right support? Will he tell us how this welcome statement will make that go further?

Mr Gauke: I confess that I have not had the opportunity to see the programme that my hon. Friend mentioned, but she is not the first person to recommend it strongly to me. I will perhaps endeavour to watch it over the weekend. She raises an important point about small businesses. We need to help small businesses to find the best way of providing support to disabled people. That will give small businesses access to people who, as I understand the programme demonstrates, have significant ability, are very talented and could bring a lot to the labour market, but who have not had the opportunities that they should have had, partly because of attitudes, culture and so on.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I note that the statement mentioned taking forward reform of the work capability assessment. I have certainly found that to be a major issue in my constituency case load. I think of Jean Birrell, my Fullarton Park constituent, who was referred to the Work Capability Assessment. She raises an important point about small businesses. We need to help small businesses to find the best way of providing support to disabled people. That will give small businesses access to people who, as I understand the programme demonstrates, have significant ability, are very talented and could bring a lot to the labour market, but who have not had the opportunities that they should have had, partly because of attitudes, culture and so on.

Mr Gauke: I have not done so, but we have made reforms to the work capability assessment process. As I said earlier, those with severe disabilities no longer need
to be reassessed in the same way. I have dealt with the matter as a constituency Member of Parliament, and I recognise the concerns that exist. I also recognise that there is not, as yet, a consensus on exactly how the work capability assessment should be reformed.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): In welcoming the Secretary of State’s statement about helping more people with health conditions back into work, may I ask what is being done to enhance the Jobcentre Plus offer, specifically in relation to helping people who have mental health issues and learning disabilities with universal credit applications?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend makes a good point. We have 300 disability employment advisers in place. I have met them and discussed their work, and I am struck by the specialist support that they can provide. We are also putting in place 200 community partners to assist further on the matter. We are trying to ensure that Jobcentre Plus is well placed to provide the support that people need.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): How does the Secretary of State react to the fact that Lord Shinkwin, an applicant for the post of disability commissioner, complained last week that he believes the post is about to be downgraded or abolished? Lord Shinkwin is a magnificent example and role model of someone who has overcome a severe disability. How does the Secretary of State react to a visible defect in the Government’s failure to act on a complaint I made some years ago about a constituent working in the civil service whose career came to an end because he could not get wheelchair access to the Box in the corner of the Chamber?

Mr Gauke: I was not aware of the latter case, but the hon. Gentleman raises an important point. I agree with him that Lord Shinkwin is a great example. My understanding is that that complaint is being investigated by the Equality and Human Rights Commission, without any ministerial interference as to whether there is a particular disability commissioner role. That is my understanding of the situation.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for the important work on this issue that has been done by his Department with the all-party group on disability, which I chair. A clear recommendation from our inquiry report is that a significant improvement could be made in employment if we leveraged public procurement contracts towards Disability Confident employers. Will he consider that further, and write to the all-party group with his thoughts?

Mr Gauke: First, I thank the hon. Lady for the work she does with the all-party group, and for her kind words about its engagement with my Department. She raises an interesting point about procurement. She will be aware that, when it comes to procurement issues, Departments and sectors very often have different asks, and the Cabinet Office obviously has to take a view. However, we are considering the issue, and I encourage all major companies, particularly those that have engagements with the Government, to look very carefully at what being a Disability Confident employer involves.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State update the House on the progress made for people damaged by the state when they received contaminated blood products during the contaminated blood scandal, particularly in relation to passporting benefits to them so that they do not keep having to go through regular assessments?

Mr Gauke: If I may, I am happy to look at that particular issue and write to the hon. Lady.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): My constituent Jade Minto suffered mental health problems in work or not. My constituent Margaret has had two PIP assessments with her daughter, who had taken a day off work. Her meeting was cancelled on the day she turned up, despite the fact that she had received written confirmation, and there was no record on the DWP system. Will the Secretary of State investigate the growing problem of PIP appointments being cancelled because of a lack of resources, and the impact that it has on disabled people in the highlands and elsewhere?
sector and has been offered a job. That sounds like a good news story, except for the fact that she is on ESA and allowed to work only a maximum of 16 hours of week, and the DWP will not allow her to take up the position because she needs to do an internal training programme that would take her over the threshold of 16 hours a week. Will the Government look at ending this crazy situation?

**Mr Gauke:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that case. I agree that that does not in any way sound like a sensible situation. The good news I can give him is that such a situation will not happen once universal credit is brought in.

**Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab):** One of the major concerns of disabled people in my constituency is about the impact of universal credit. I note that in the right hon. Gentleman’s statement last week, he postponed the roll-out of universal credit in his constituency and those of the Prime Minister and the First Secretary of State. As he is in the mood to reconsider the policy, will he do the same and pause the roll-out of universal credit for the people of Barnsley East?

**Mr Gauke:** The previous question provided an example of how universal credit will actually be much better for disabled people. We are rolling out universal credit in a way that is safe, and we are making adjustments as and when we need to, but I am pleased to say that the date on which universal credit will be fully rolled out remains unchanged—March 2022. If it could be earlier, I would make it earlier, but that is the safest point at which we can do it. As I have said, universal credit will be an advantage for many disadvantaged people, because they will not be faced with some of the current disincentives, such as not working more than 16 hours a week.

**Point of Order**

12.54 pm

**Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op):** On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. At the Health Committee session on 31 October, I asked the Health Secretary whether he had visited a locked mental health rehabilitation ward—such wards are currently home to over 3,500 patients across our country—and he answered yes. Over three weeks ago, I followed that up with a named day parliamentary question to ask the Secretary of State which ward he had visited and when. The answer I received said:

“The information is not held in the format requested.”

I therefore tabled a subsequent named day parliamentary question, this time just asking which locked mental health rehabilitation ward the Secretary of State had visited. The answer I received the other day stated that “the Secretary of State has visited a wide range of mental health facilities including 15 since July 2016, however the information requested is not held.”

Is it in order for the Secretary of State not to disclose to a Member of Parliament details of a visit that he confirmed to the Select Committee he had made; and if not, what advice will you offer me as to how I may solicit this very important information from the Secretary of State?

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I cannot comment directly on the adequacy or otherwise of ministerial responses, but the hon. Lady has clearly raised her concerns about this issue and Government Front Benchers will have heard what she said. My best advice is that the hon. Lady should consult the Table Office about other ways in which she can raise this issue—perhaps in a short debate, and certainly at Health questions.
Emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)

12.56 pm

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the current situation in Yemen.

Mr Andrew Mitchell: I am extremely grateful to Mr Speaker for granting this debate. There is rapidly rising concern in Britain about what is happening in Yemen and the part that Britain is playing in this crisis. There is deep concern that an almighty catastrophe of biblical proportions is unfolding in Yemen before our eyes, and a considerable fear that Britain is dangerously complicit in it.

I had the opportunity, thanks to Oxfam and the United Nations, to visit Yemen early this year, and I am most grateful to the Saudi Arabian authorities for facilitating that visit. I think I remain the only European politician to have visited Sana’a and the northern part of Yemen in the past three years. I want to pay tribute to the extraordinary work that the humanitarian agencies and the UN are carrying out, particularly the work that Jamie McGoldrick and his team at the UN are so brilliantly doing in almost impossible circumstances.

I returned from Yemen deeply concerned at what I had learned and seen, and I expressed my concern to both the Foreign Office and the British Government privately, and to the Saudi authorities, courtesy of His Excellency the Saudi Arabian ambassador. I regard myself as a friend of Saudi Arabia, albeit a candid one. Like many, I have great respect for the domestic reforms and modernisation currently in progress in the kingdom, which are being led by the Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman.

My visit to Yemen enabled me both to spend time with the humanitarian agencies and to meet the Houthi leadership, the former President of Yemen Ali Abdullah Saleh and those currently leading what is the largest political party in Yemeni politics, the General People’s Congress.

Mr Andrew Mitchell: I beg to move.

Mr Andrew Mitchell: The point I have just been making is that the Houthis are responsible for violence and for disappearances. In the few sentences before I gave way to him, I was making clear precisely what the position is in respect of the Houthis. The fact is that they are in control of large parts of Yemen and they will not be easily shifted.

During my visit, I was also able to travel to Sa’ada in the north, which has been largely destroyed. Posters in the city in Arabic and English say that Yemeni children are being killed by the British and Americans. No fewer than 25 humanitarian agencies wrote to the Foreign Secretary on 13 November. In my many years of working with humanitarian organisations, I have seldom seen such a clear, convincing and utterly united approach from so many of our world-leading NGOs and charities.

I want to be clear about the situation on the ground as of last night. The position is as follows. Some humanitarian flights into Sana’a resumed on 26 November following the intensification of the blockade imposed on 5 November. Some limited shipments are coming into Hodeidah, Yemen’s principal port, and Saleef, but very small amounts. Two initial shipments to those ports have brought just 30,000 metric tonnes of commercial wheat—less than 10% of what Yemen needs a month to keep its population alive—and 300,000 metric tonnes of wheat was turned away in the first two weeks of the blockade. This morning three vessels loaded with food are outside Hodeidah awaiting permission from the Saudi authorities to enter.

One humanitarian air cargo flight landed last weekend with 1.9 million doses of diphtheria vaccine. These vaccines will help contain the current outbreak of diphtheria—a disease known as the strangling angel of children; a disease that we no longer see in Britain and Europe and which since August has produced more than 170 suspected cases and at least 14 deaths so far.

There has been no access for fuel. Fuel is critical to the milling and trucking of food to vulnerable people in need as well as the ongoing operation of health, water and sewerage systems. Humanitarian agencies need at a
minimum 1,000,000 litres of fuel each month. Without fuel, hospitals are shutting down due to lack of power and water. At least seven whole cities have run out of clean water and sanitation and aid agencies are unable to get food to starving families. The destruction of clean water and sanitation facilities is directly responsible for the outbreak earlier this year of cholera affecting nearly 1 million people.

To summarise, the effect and impact of the blockade could not be graver. Yemen is a country ravaged by medieval diseases and on the precipice of famine. With rapidly dwindling food and fuel stocks and the dire humanitarian situation pushing at least 7 million people into famine, it is now vital that there is unimpeded access for both humanitarian and commercial cargo to enter Hodeidah and Saleef, including those carrying fuel. Approximately 21 million Yemenis today stand in need of humanitarian assistance, but to be clear, humanitarian aid alone is not enough to meet the needs of the entire country. Without access for critical commercial goods, the likelihood of famine and a renewed spike of cholera remain. The international humanitarian agencies are doing their best to support around 7 million people, but the rest of the population rely on the commercial sector and the lack of food and fuel is causing desperate problems, with price hikes over 100% in costs for essential commodities.

**John Spellar** (Warley) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for drawing breath and giving way. He is right to identify and highlight the humanitarian crisis in Yemen. He does that cause no service by glossing over the causes of the situation, particularly the Iranian-backed Houthi rebellion, with the violence that has accompanied it. Many of my constituents whose families are still in Aden are terrified by the prospect of the Houthis taking over. Does he acknowledge that the Government of Yemen are internationally recognised and are being supported by the Saudi-led coalition? Can we have a bit of balance on the causes of this event?

**Mr Mitchell:** If we are able to detain the right hon. Gentleman for the rest of my remarks, I will directly address many of the points that he has made.

The Saudi pledge to open some ports for urgent humanitarian supplies does not come close to feeding a population reliant on commercial imports for 80% of its food. The best analogy for Hodeidah is the equivalent of the port of London; 80% of all that Yemeni’s eat is imported and 70% comes through Hodeidah Port. As the UN Secretary General said last week:

“The flour milling capacity of Hodeida and Saleef Ports and their proximity to 70% of people in need makes them indispensable to the survival of Yemen. … Unless the blockade on these Ports is lifted famine throughout Yemen is a very real threat including on the southern border of Saudi Arabia”.

So the recent Saudi proposal in respect of opening other ports completely misses the point. No one should accept the Saudis’ minor concessions on humanitarian access as a victory. Allowing some UN flights to land and ships to dock does not constitute the unhindered humanitarian access that Saudi Arabia is required to provide under international humanitarian law. Humanitarian cargo alone will not avert a famine in Yemen. All it will do is slow the inevitable descent into disease and starvation for millions of Yemenis.

**Bob Stewart** (Beckenham) (Con): I was under the impression that the Government had opened the ports, including Hodeidah, but that the rebels still have not opened ports. Obviously, we want all the ports in Yemen to be opened as fast as possible. Right now, my understanding is that the Government and the Saudis have opened up the ports that they control. Am I wrong?

**Mr Mitchell:** My hon. Friend is partially wrong. The two critical ports are Hodeidah and Saleef, for the reasons that I have explained. Shipping is not being allowed to enter those ports in an unfettered way. I want to be very clear about this. Humanitarian support without commercial imports coming into the country—especially food, fuel and medicine—will condemn millions of Yemenis to certain death. So what does this mean on the ground? Every hour 27 children are diagnosed as acutely malnourished. That is 600 more starving children every day. According to the World Food Programme, as things stand, 150,000 malnourished children could starve to death in the coming months and 17 million people do not know from where their next meal is coming. As of today, at least 400,000 children are suffering from severe acute malnutrition, as medically defined.

When children have severe malnutrition, they reach a critical point at which they are no longer able to eat for themselves and need to be fed by naso-gastric tubes. Prior to that point, we can assist them: we can revive them quickly with nutritional biscuits such as Plumpy’Nut at a cost of a few pence per child. But once they are so starved of nutrition that they require medical assistance and their organs begin to fail, they cannot play and they cannot smile. Parents have to be told that their children still love them, but they are just too weak to show it.

I repeat that malnutrition in Yemen today is threatening the lives of hundreds of thousands of children. The imagery on our television screens, captured by only the most intrepid of journalists due to Saudi restrictions on media access, seem to be from a bygone era—emaciated children and tiny babies in incubators, their tenuous hold on life dependent on fuel for hospital generators that is fast running out. Nawal al-Maghafi’s award-winning reporting for the BBC showed shocking and heart-breaking images of famine and shattering health systems, even before the current blockade.

**Graham P. Jones:** The right hon. Gentleman says that there are limitations on journalism, but actually al-Jazeera has a lot of access and does not report the Saudi position favourably to the world. We have only to go on YouTube to see an awful lot of modern media from inside north Yemen and Sana’a—and from Saudi Arabia, where Houthis regularly kill Saudi people.

**Mr Mitchell:** The hon. Gentleman will, however, accept that where a blockade specifically targets journalists to stop them from coming in, it is reasonable to assume that the regime in control has something to hide, which it does not want journalists to see. After all, if there were nothing to hide, presumably journalists would be allowed access.

The 25 humanitarian agencies that wrote to the Foreign Secretary on 13 November did so because Britain is part of a coalition that is blockading and attacking...
Yemen. As the pen holder on Yemen at the United Nations, we are responsible for leading action at the Security Council. We bear a special responsibility—physical, as well as moral—to lead the international response to end this conflict. Yet our Government have declined to call this what it is: an illegal blockade. Saudi Arabia is in direct breach of humanitarian law and specifically in breach of Security Council resolution 2216, which “urges all parties to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian assistance, as well as rapid, safe and unhindered access for humanitarian actors to reach people in need of humanitarian assistance, including medical assistance.”

That is what the resolution says—it could hardly be clearer. The Security Council resolution was initiated and drafted by the UK in 2015. The British Government were right to condemn the attempted Houthi missile attack on Riyadh airport, as the Minister for the Middle East did in the House last week, but where is the British condemnation of the 1,000 days of intensive Saudi bombing of Yemen?

On each of the three nights I spent in Sana’a earlier this year, there were six bombing runs by the Saudi airforce attacking the city. I was in no danger whatever, as I was safe with the United Nations, but imagine the fear and horror of families and children who night after night are the subject of crude bombing attacks, which most usually destroy civilian and non-military targets. Throughout this conflict our “quiet diplomacy” has failed to curb outrage after outrage perpetrated by our allies as they destroy bridges, roads and hospitals. No wonder the UN Secretary-General has called this a “stupid” war.

Despite holding the pen at the UN Security Council, the UK has so far failed to take any steps whatever to use it to respond to the recent escalation. We have not condemned the illegal restrictions on humanitarian aid and vital imports of food, fuel and medicines. We have not called for parties to end violations against civilians or to set out a revitalised peace process given the political stalemate and the widespread recognition that resolution 2216 constitutes a barrier to a realistic political process. The UK did not even dissent from a draft UN Security Council statement, circulated by Egypt, that failed entirely to mention the dire impact of the blockade. This silence is shameful: it not only lets down the Yemenis, but threatens our position on the UN Security Council as other nations fill the void left by our abdication of leadership.

The senseless death of millions is not the only risk. By tightening the noose around a starving nation, Saudi Arabia is fuelling the propaganda machines of the very opponents it wishes to vanquish. More than collective punishment of the Yemenis, this is self-harm on a grand scale.

When I went to Sa’dah, I visited a school that had been bombed by the Saudi air force. Children were being taught in tents and with textbooks largely financed by the British taxpayer. On my arrival, the children started chanting in much the same way as children in our primary schools declaim nursery rhymes. On inquiring of the translator what they were saying, I was told they were chanting, “Death to the Saudis and Americans!” In deference to my visit, they had omitted from their chanting the third country on their list.

Far from helping to make Saudi Arabia’s borders safer and diminishing the threat of international terrorism, we are radicalising an entire generation of Yemeni young people, whose hatred of us for what we are doing to them and their country may well translate into a potent recruitment tool for international terrorists. Every action of the Saudis currently bolsters and serves the narrative of Saudi Arabia’s enemies, who want Saudi Arabia to be seen as the aggressor so that they win the support of the general population.

Graham P. Jones rose—

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab) rose—

Mr Mitchell: I give way to the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), who leads the all-party group on Yemen.

Keith Vaz: I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. He was present at the meeting earlier this week when we heard from the Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister, who said that the Saudi Arabian Government do not believe that this war can be won. What is the point of continuing with a war that cannot be won?

Mr Mitchell: Well, I will now turn directly to the position of Saudi Arabia, whose impressive Foreign Minister, Ahmed al-Jubeir, generously came to the House of Commons on Tuesday this week to speak to the all-party group, as the right hon. Gentleman has just said. During the course of the conversation, during which the right hon. Gentleman and I were pretty forthright, he asked for advice, making it clear that Saudi Arabia had not fought a war of this nature before.

My advice is as follows: there must be an immediate end to this appalling blockade. Of course, working with the UN, the Saudis are within their rights to search shipping and other transport for illicit weapons, but they cannot impound or obstruct vessels carrying vital food and medical supplies. Currently, the Saudis are refusing to allow 26 ships that have been cleared by the UN to be offloaded. If the Saudis have doubts about the effectiveness of UN inspection, they must of course be part of it.

There must be an immediate ceasefire and a return to reinvigorated, inclusive peace talks. A new Security Council resolution is long overdue. It is widely recognised that resolution 2216 is an anachronism that constitutes a barrier to any peace process. There can be no preconditions from either side. The Houthis and the General People’s Congress are in control of Sana’a; they will not be easily shifted—certainly not by an air campaign that day after day consolidates support for them on the ground and directs the hatred of the local population to those who are dropping the bombs.

The Houthis did not start out as allies of the Iranians; the Houthis are Zaidis, not Shi’a. But of course in a region where “my enemy’s enemy is my friend”, it is not hard to understand why the Houthis look to Iran, although, given the blockade, it is not easy for Iran to arm the Houthis in any significant way. The prolonging of the conflict and the resulting cost to Saudi Arabia in regional instability is a gift to Iran.
Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making an extremely powerful point about the nature of Iran’s arming of the Houthis. Does he not, however, accept the research by Conflict Armament Research that clearly points out that weapons from Iran have come through Yemen and are now being used against Saudi Arabia? He makes the absolutely valid point that Saudi action is only further encouraging such violence, but does he not also accept that Tehran is wilfully undermining and destroying an Arab state to use it as a proxy against Saudi Arabia?

Mr Mitchell: I strongly agree with my hon. Friend that blocking weapons—from any country, but certainly from Iran—is the right thing to do, but I am condemning without reservation a blockade that is likely to lead to the famine and death of very large numbers of people.

The price for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia of continuing on its current path will be certain failure and utter humiliation, both in the region and more widely. The clock is ticking. Already in Yemen a child dies every 10 minutes. Yemen is a time bomb threatening international peace and security. Our failure to denounce these crimes and use our leverage to stop them condemns millions of Yemenis to death in the future. Shying away from demanding compliance, by all, with the international rules-based order that we in Britain helped to take root and also weakens a strained system that keeps British citizens safe.

Britain’s policy is riddled with internal inconsistencies. While one limb of the British Government is desperately trying to secure entry into the port of Hodeidah for vital food, medicine and fuel, another limb is assisting with the blockade and, indeed, the targeting of attacks. One limb supports the erection of seven new cranes that are vital for unloading essential supplies, while another supports the destruction of those same cranes.

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): My right hon. Friend is doing an excellent job in explaining some of the background to the conflict, but I will not have him stand in the House of Commons and say that British personnel are there to observe, and I am happy to withdraw that very specific point.

Mr Mitchell: If my right hon. Friend gives me such an undertaking, I am happy to withdraw that very specific point.

I have never called for an arms embargo on Saudi Arabia, because the kingdom is surrounded by enemies and is wealthy. Saudi Arabia is absolutely entitled to defend itself, and we as its friend and ally are entitled to sell it weapons as long as we do so in accordance with one of the strictest licensing regimes in the world. We may also have some influence that we could exercise to ensure that weapons are used in accordance with the rules of war. I cannot help observing, however, that British munitions are causing destruction and misery in Yemen that the other limb of the British Government, to which I referred earlier, is seeking to staunch through aid and assistance paid for by the British taxpayer.

I have no doubt that, during her current visit to the middle east, the Prime Minister will use every political, economic and security argument available to her to persuade the Saudis of the moral and strategic failure that they are pursuing in Yemen. I profoundly hope that the lifting of the blockade on Yemen will be the No. 1 priority on her visit. We must use every inch of our leverage—diplomatic, political and economic—to demonstrate to our allies that they have more to gain from peace than from a fruitless military strategy that is exacerbating the world’s largest humanitarian catastrophe and undermining the international rules-based order that keeps us all safe.

Hilary Benn: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way to me again. On the question of arms sales, given that the final report of the United Nations panel of experts on Yemen found that the coalition had conducted airstrikes in violation of international humanitarian law, and given the consolidated criteria—the rules governing arms sales from the United Kingdom—is there not a bit of a problem if the UK Government do not pause their sales, which is what I called for, along with the Leader of the Opposition, when I was shadow Foreign Secretary, since we have an obligation to see those claims investigated? Otherwise, is there not a risk that the sales will be in breach of our own law?

Mr Mitchell: I agree that it is important for these incidents to be investigated, and investigated impartially, because otherwise the investigation will carry no credence.

I have completed the speech that I intended to make, but I think it worth adding that I have steered a way from a debate on an arms embargo, because I think it would have taken our eye off the critical ball. We must see an end to this blockade, for humanitarian reasons and for reasons of international humanitarian law.
We are talking about what has been widely recognised to be the world’s biggest humanitarian crisis, and it is threatening to become one of the worst such crises for decades. In those circumstances, an emergency debate is more than appropriate. It is regrettable in many ways that the House is not packed today. On too many occasions the war in Yemen has been described as a forgotten war, and indeed it is. The role that we play in it is important, and needs to be more widely acknowledged.

It is welcome that, since the Minister’s statement on the crisis 10 days ago, we have seen a partial easing of the blockade of Yemen’s ports and airports to allow some consignments of food and medical supplies to be brought into rebel-held areas, but, as the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield said, it is not nearly enough to address the scale of the humanitarian needs. Hundreds of thousands of entirely innocent children still face death over the coming weeks owing to malnutrition and disease. If they do not receive the food, clean water and medical supplies that they need in order to survive, and receive them in the long-term quantities that are required, we know what will happen.

If those children are to obtain the relief that they need, all parties must be willing to do whatever it takes, including the complete cessation of violence, the full lifting of the blockades, the opening of humanitarian corridors over land, and a guarantee of safe passage for aid convoys. I hope that the Minister will be able to update us today on what is being done to achieve those ends.

We all understand the backdrop to the current crisis. We understand the anger of the Saudi Government at the firing of a ballistic missile at their own country by the Houthi rebels on 4 November. That was an act that all Opposition Members unequivocally condemn, just as we condemn the Saudi airstrike on 1 November which killed 31 people, including six children, at a market in the Sahar district of Sa’ada. Both sides are guilty of attacking civilians, both sides should be equally condemned for doing so, and, in due course, both sides should be held to account for any violations of international humanitarian law.

Following the Houthi missile strike, the Saudis strengthened their blockade of all rebel-held areas of Yemen. As a result, what little supplies there were of food, medicine and other humanitarian goods were chocked off for at least three weeks, and remain just an inadequate trickle today. The damage that will have been done to millions of children who were already facing severe malnutrition, a cholera epidemic and an outbreak of diphtheria, will, as the UN has said, be measured in the lives that are lost. As the World Health Organisation, the World Food Programme and UNICEF have stated, the tightening of the blockade has made “an already catastrophic situation far worse.” They concluded:

“To deprive this many from the basic means of survival is an unconscionable act and a violation of humanitarian principles and law.”

In that context, I must go back to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) 10 days ago: how do the Government view this month’s blockade as compatible with international humanitarian law, a body of law that clearly states that starvation of civilian populations cannot be used as a weapon of war and any blockades established for military purposes must allow civilian populations access to the food and other essential supplies that they need to live?

Graham P. Jones: The situation in Yemen is of course terrible and catastrophic, but does my right hon. Friend not agree that the main reason for that is the collapse of the economic system within Yemen?

Emily Thornberry: However we got here, it cannot be made better by there being a blockade and millions of starving children. It is my view—and I believe the view of this House—that the blockade should be lifted and that we must find a peace process and a way of moving the sides apart to allow these children to survive over the winter.

When a tactic of surrender or survive was used by President Assad in Syria, the Foreign Secretary was happy to condemn it, but he has uttered not a single word of criticism when the same tactic has been used by his friend Crown Prince Salman of Saudi Arabia, the architect of the Yemen conflict, or, as the Foreign Secretary likes to call him, “a remarkable young man.”

So let me ask the Minister this specifically: while the blockade was fully in place over the past three weeks, apparently in clear breach of international humanitarian law, were any export licences granted for the sale of arms from the UK to the Saudi-led coalition?

When my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North East raised this issue last week, the Minister seemed to suggest that the blockade was justified from a military point of view because of the alleged smuggling of missiles from Iran to the Houthi rebels. But I ask him again why he disagrees with the confidential briefing prepared by the panel of experts appointed by the UN Security Council and circulated on 10 November. That briefing has been referred to already, but let me quote from it:

“The panel finds that imposition of access restrictions is another attempt by the Saudi Arabia-led coalition to use...resolution 2216 as justification for obstructing the delivery of commodities that are essentially civilian in nature.”

It goes on to say that, while the Houthis undoubtedly possess some ballistic missile capacity:

“The panel has seen no evidence to support claims of” ballistic missiles
“having been transferred to the Houthi-Saleh alliance from external sources”.

If the Minister disagrees with that assessment, which I understand he does, can he state the evidence on which he does so, and will he undertake to share that evidence with the UN panel of experts? However, if there is no such evidence, I ask him again: how can the blockade be justified from the perspective of international humanitarian law, and how can the Government justify selling Saudi Arabia the arms that were used to enforce that blockade?

We know that, even if the blockade of Yemen’s ports is permanently lifted, the civilian population of Yemen will continue to suffer as long as this conflict carries on, and the only way that suffering will finally end is through a lasting ceasefire and political agreement. As the whole House knows, it is the UK’s ordained role to
act as the penholder for a UN ceasefire resolution on Yemen. That is a matter I have raised many times in this House, and I raise it again today. It has now been one year and one month since Britain’s ambassador to the United Nations, Matthew Rycroft, circulated Britain’s draft resolution to other members of the UN Security Council, and this is what he said back then:

“We have decided...to put forward a draft Security Council resolution...calling for an immediate cessation of hostilities and a resumption of the political process.”

That was a year and a month ago, and still no resolution has been presented. That is one year and one month when no progress has been made towards peace, and when the conflict has continued to escalate and the humanitarian crisis has become the worst in the world.

Keith Vaz: I thank my right hon. Friend very much for what she is saying, and she is absolutely right. Twelve months have elapsed since the promise that there would be a resolution before the UN. The Quint met last night in London, and the Foreign Secretary tweeted a photograph of himself with the participants, but there is no timetable. Does my right hon. Friend agree that these meetings are meaningless without a timetable for peace with all the parties at the table at the same time?

Emily Thornberry: My right hon. Friend is right: warm words butter no parsnips, as my grandmother used to say. Matthew Rycroft says now that “the political track...is at a dead-end. There is no meaningful political process going on”.

If we are wrong about that, we would be very grateful for some reassurance from the Minister, but we have been waiting and waiting, and children are dying, and we have to do something about it.

We are bound to ask, for example, what has happened to that draft resolution: why has it been killed off—indeed, has it been killed off? Is the situation as the Saudi ambassador to the UN said when first asked about the UK’s draft resolution this time last year:

“There is a continuous and joint agreement with Britain concerning the draft resolution, and whether there is a need for it or not”? We must ask this Minister: is that “continuous and joint agreement” with Saudi Arabia still in place? If so, why has it never been disclosed to the House?

The fear is that Saudi Arabia does not want a ceasefire and that it sees no value in negotiating a peace—not when Crown Prince Salman believes that the rebellion can still be crushed, whatever the humanitarian cost. If he does believe that, are we really to accept that the UK Government are going along with that judgment?

The Minister will, of course, point to the so-called peace forum chaired by the Foreign Secretary this week—the Quint—and say that that is evidence that the UK is doing its job to move the political process forward, but when the only participants in the peace forum are Saudi Arabia, two of its allies, and two of the countries supplying most of its arms, that is not a “peace forum.” I respectfully suggest that far from being a peace forum, it is a council of war. What we really need—what we urgently need and have needed for more than a year and a month—is the moral and political force which comes from a UN Security Council resolution obliging all parties to cease hostilities, obliging all parties to allow humanitarian relief, and obliging all parties to work towards a political solution.

I ask the Minister: how much longer do we have to wait? When will the Government finally bring forward the resolution? If the answer is that, because of opposition from the Saudis and the Americans, they will never present that resolution, do they not at least owe it to fellow members of the UN Security Council, and to Members of this House—and, indeed, to the children of Yemen—to admit that the role of penholder on Yemen is no longer a position they can in good conscience occupy and that they should pass on that role of drafting a resolution to another country which is less joined at the hip to Crown Prince Salman and President Donald Trump?

Let me close by quoting my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition in his last letter to the Prime Minister on the subject of Yemen:

“Whilst the immediate priority should be humanitarian assistance...it is time the Government takes immediate steps to play its part in ending the suffering of the Yemeni people, ends its support of the Saudi coalition’s conduct in the war and take appropriate action” through the UN “to bring the conflict to a peaceful, negotiated resolution.”

Those are the three tests of whether the Government are willing to take action today, and I hope that by the end of this emergency debate we will have some indication of whether they are going to take that action, or whether it is just going to be more of the same.

1.39 pm

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) for securing this opportunity to discuss what we all understand to be a significant humanitarian crisis in Yemen. I appreciate the fact that he visited Yemen earlier this year, and he clearly has a deep and passionate knowledge of the situation there. A number of questions have come up, but I would like to start with the issue that tends to be the most neglected—namely, the origins of the conflict. We seem to start these debates partway through. I will get to the questions that have been raised, but it is important to set out the background because it explains the complexity with which a number of Members have approached the issue. It is not as clear cut as some might suggest.

The causes of the conflict are numerous and complex. Since unification in 1990, Yemen has suffered internal power struggles, unrest and terrorist attacks. After a year of protests in 2011, the 33-year rule of President Saleh transferred to President Hadi as part of a unity Government brokered with regional support. A national dialogue process began, which offered an opportunity for a democratic future. Tragically, that opportunity was lost when the Houthi insurgency movement, which claimed to have been excluded from the national dialogue process, sought to take power through violence.

In September 2014, Houthi rebels took the capital by force, prompting President Hadi to flee to the southern city of Aden. The Houthis then began advancing on the south of the country, President Hadi, as the internationally recognised leader of the legitimate Government of Yemen, requested military help from the Saudi-led coalition. The conflict between the Government of Yemen, backed by the coalition, and the Houthis and their allies, backed
by former President Saleh, has so far lasted 1,000 days. Let us also remember the attacks carried out by al-Qaeda, Daesh and non-state groups against the Yemeni people, other countries in the region and international shipping lanes. Those groups use ungoverned space, which Yemen has been in the past and threatens to become again.

The impact of conflict and terrorism on the Yemeni people has been devastating. Let me read a letter that has been sent to the House today from the ambassador of the Republic of Yemen to the United Kingdom. He says:

“I represent the Government of Yemen, which came to power after the popular overthrow of former dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh. This government is elected, UN-mandated and constitutionally legitimate. It was driven from the capital Sana’a by force, by the Houthi militias in alliance with Ali Abdullah Saleh.

The Arab Coalition is in Yemen at our request, to restore constitutional government and reverse the Houthi coup. Actions that undermine that Coalition also undermine us.

In the last two weeks the Houthis added extra taxes and customs checkpoints that increased the prices in areas under their control by more than 100%. As an example the Yemeni government sells a gallon of petrol at the cost of 850 Yemeni Riyals in cities like Aden and Mareb which are under the government’s control while in Houthi controlled areas it costs 1700 Yemeni Riyals. The prices of wheat and flour face a similar increase.

The Houthis continue to place the city of Taiz, in central Yemen, under siege preventing any aid from going in. People living in Taiz are forced to smuggle in food, medicine and even water. Last week an entire family were executed in Taiz under the hands of Houthi armed men, we have an obligation as a government to protect our citizens.”

I start there because, all too often, that side of the discussion is just not raised at all. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield for this House earlier in his response to me about the role of the military coalition. The UK is not involved in carrying out strikes, or in directing or conducting operations in Yemen. Let me fill that out a bit more.

Royal Air Force and Royal Navy liaison officers monitor Saudi-led coalition operations in Yemen and provide information to the UK Ministry of Defence. The liaison officers are not embedded personnel taking part in Saudi-led operations, they are not involved in carrying out strikes and they do not direct or conduct operations in Yemen. They remain under UK command and control. Sensitive information provided by the liaison officers is used by the Permanent Joint Headquarters and MOD officials when providing advice on Saudi-led coalition capability and when conducting analysis of incidents of potential concern which result from the Saudi-led coalition air operations in Yemen. The operations directorate maintains a database, referred to as the tracker, which records incidents and subsequent analysis. We have been tracking 318 incidents of potential concern since 2015, and this is used to inform the MOD’s advice to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Bob Stewart: I have visited the command and control centre in Riyadh. It is true that Royal Air Force personnel are present, but they are not involved in the targeting. When I spoke to them, part of their role seemed to be to help the Saudis and their allies to ensure that the rules of engagement resulted in minimum casualties. Their intention was to try to get the rules of engagement to be as good as our own, and they seemed to be doing that quite successfully while I was there.

Alistair Burt: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his personal observations.

The question of arms control has been raised. We have a rigorous legal and parliamentary process, and ensuring that international humanitarian law is not breached is clearly a vital part of that. The information supplied by those liaison officers is crucial to ensuring that our international obligations are observed. That is why they are there.

Mr Mitchell: This debate is, above all, about the humanitarian consequences, and the UN Secretary-General has said that Saudi Arabia is, through the blockade, in breach not only of resolution 2216 but of international humanitarian law. I say to my right hon. Friend, who is a long-standing personal friend of more than 30 years, that I think he may be in danger of having misled the House earlier in his response to me about the role of British servicemen. Would he like to correct the record and use this opportunity to make this very clear? Otherwise, what he said may be open to misinterpretation.
Alistair Burt: I do not quite know what bit of what I have said my right hon. Friend is referring to. I have read out the details in relation to the work of our liaison officers on international humanitarian law, and I cannot say anything different. If I have said anything that he thinks is wrong, he can correct me either now or at the end of the debate when he has an opportunity to say something else. I have put on record what our situation is. If he thinks that that is misleading, I am here to be corrected, but I am reading out what I believe is the Government’s position very clearly.

Emily Thornberry: I wonder whether the Minister could clarify something that has always genuinely confused me about the role of the military in Saudi Arabia. Is there just one targeting centre, or is it correct that there is another in the south? Are military personnel involved in the south of the country? Indeed, are people from British companies, BAE Systems in particular, involved in the south of the country? If they are supposed to be there to ensure that international humanitarian law is not breached, what are they doing? Are they ensuring that targeting is better or that things are not targeted? If they are ensuring that targeting is better, how is it that so many civilian targets seem to get hit?

Alistair Burt: The answer to the last part of the right hon. Lady’s question comes from the investigations into incidents where there is legitimate concern that there may have been civilian casualties. That process was started by the coalition; it was not in place at the beginning. We have provided advice not only so that information can be given to us, but to assist in the process of ensuring that the coalition targets legitimate military targets. I understand that thousands of places have been deemed not to be targets. As in any conflict—this is one of the reasons why my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield was safe—there are indications of where attacks should not happen, and I believe that we have been part of the process of ensuring that the coalition understands the international rules of engagement.

I cannot directly answer the question about BAE Systems personnel being elsewhere as I just do not know the answer, but I have noted what the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury said, and I will come back to that.

Hilary Benn: I want to move on to discuss the humanitarian situation, but I am of course happy to give way to right hon. Gentleman.

Emily Thornberry: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for indulging me one more time. I understand that some of the information may be sensitive, but are the British Government in a position to share the information that makes them so confident that there have been no breaches of international humanitarian law? The UN panel of experts seems to have come to a different conclusion.

Alistair Burt: The initial responsibility to investigate any incidents lies with the state involved, and Saudi Arabia has been doing that with its investigations. I genuinely do not know the process of transferring that information to the UN should the UN request to see it, but I will have an answer for the right hon. Lady. I know that there has been an instruction to be mindful of the time, Mr Deputy Speaker, so I will be as tight on time as I can, but I want to talk about both the blockade and the humanitarian response before moving on to the negotiations. As for the restrictions brought in after the missile attack of 4 November, I will deal first with where the missile came from. The right hon. Lady asked me whether we disagree with the UN’s assessment, and yes we do. That draft assessment was written some time ago, and there is the possibility that a different assessment by the UN has not been made public. The United Kingdom is quite confident that there is sufficient evidence to indicate that the missile came from an external source. If it did not, the right hon. Lady and others can answer the question of where such a missile came from in Yemen, but it is quite clear to us that it came from an external source. We therefore disagree with the UN’s initial draft report, and the evidence will come through in due course when a further report is published. That is all I can say.

The coalition’s response to a direct attack on Riyadh airport was sharp and severe. It wanted to be able to protect itself and, in doing so, placed restrictions on the ports in order to control what was coming in. Now, we do not disagree with what was said by either the right hon. Lady or my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield, and the UK’s clear position is that it is imperative that those restrictions are relieved. I am not going to dance on the head of a pin here; if Members
want to call it a blockade, it is a blockade. There is no point in dancing around that. However, humanitarian and commercial supplies must be allowed in in order to feed the people.

As my right hon. Friend said, and as the House knows well, the vast bulk of food, water and fuel that comes into Yemen to keep the people alive is not humanitarian aid; it is ordinary commercial stuff. We have been clear right from the beginning of the restrictions that the UK’s view is that they should be lifted, and we have maintained that, so to be told that we have not done enough is just wrong. As evidence of some degree of success, there was some easing of the restrictions last week, but not enough. I have an update that I am happy to share with the House. It states:

“Humanitarian and commercial vessels are beginning to enter Hodeidah and Saleef ports. Since Sunday, three vessels have arrived and are being unloaded. This includes 2 commercial vessels into Hodeidah carrying respectively 5,500 metric tonnes and 29,520 metric tonnes of wheat flour. One humanitarian vessel has arrived into Saleef with supplies to support 1.8 million people for a month (and 25,000 metric tonnes of food). In addition, approximately 23 vessels have been cleared by UN Verification Inspection Mechanism (UNVIM) although not yet permitted to unload.”

It is essential that they are permitted to unload, and we are making representations to that effect. However, the fact that there has been some movement in response to representations made by, among others, the highest levels of the British Government indicates that the urgency of relieving the humanitarian situation is being heard. At the same time, we recognise the security needs of those who are threatened by missiles targeted at their commercial airports and civilian areas.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op):
I welcome the fact that the Minister has described the situation as a blockade. If the blockade is not lifted completely, what is his estimate of how close Yemen is to famine—days or weeks?

Alistair Burt: Reports differ depending on the area. Five cities have already run out of fuel, meaning that power supplies, sanitation and other things cannot be maintained. On average, food supplies appear to be better and may be measured in months, but that will not apply to every individual area because some will be worse than others. A Minister will not stand here and say that because things can be measured by a few more days, the situation is less urgent; it is not. It is absolutely top of our priorities. In a variety of different ways, the UK has sought to make clear the importance of responding not only to the security needs of the coalition, but to the humanitarian situation.

I want to put the following on the record. On 5 November, there was a Foreign and Commonwealth Office statement condemning the attempted missile attack. On 13 November, my right hon. Friend the new Secretary of State for International Development spoke to Mark Lowcock of the UN about the humanitarian situation. On 15 November, an FCO statement stressed the need for immediate humanitarian and commercial access. On 16 November, I spoke to the UAE’s Minister of State. On 18 November, the Foreign Secretary made a call to the UN Secretary-General. On 20 November, I spoke to the House. On 21 November, I spoke to the Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister. On 23 November, the Foreign Secretary spoke to Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. On 29 November, as we speak, the Prime Minister is visiting Riyadh, where she said:

“I am also clear that the flow of commercial supplies, on which the country depends, must be resumed if we are to avoid a humanitarian catastrophe. During my discussions with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Riyadh last night, we agreed that steps needed to be taken as a matter of urgency to address this, and that we would take forward more detailed discussions on how this could be achieved.”

The Foreign Secretary hosted talks in London this week, after which we will intensify efforts with all parties to reach a settlement that will sustain security for Saudi Arabia, the coalition and Yemen.

For the House to feel in any way that there is not a serious response to the catastrophic situation that my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield set out with passion and determination is not correct. We are doing everything we can, at the highest level, to deal with the humanitarian crisis and the security situation.

Mr Mitchell: I am grateful for the Prime Minister’s powerful words in Riyadh last night, which my right hon. Friend has just read out. Those words will be welcomed on both sides of the House. This is the nub of the argument he is trying to address: I am sure the House feels that the extent of the crisis and the Government’s response are not equal. I have no prescription for the political answer to the humanitarian crisis we have described today, but the breaches of international humanitarian law are so egregious that they call for a tougher and firmer response from Her Majesty’s Government.

Alistair Burt: We are getting to the nub of it now. We are all agreed on this, and we know how serious it is. I have set out what we have been trying to do. If there was another lever to pull that would deal with the situation—my right hon. Friend has just said that he does not know the political answer—we would pull it, but that is not the case. The best lever to pull is in the negotiations process that we have discussed. We do not think this can be done through the UN. It is much better to deal with the parties, on both sides, who have the opportunity and the responsibility to get something done around the table.

The other day, the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) rightly mentioned the Quint talks, in which a number of states are involved. It is unfair, on reflection, to call it a war council. The Omanis, for example, would be deeply upset with that reference. The talks involve those who have the capacity not only to make decisions on one side—the coalition side—but to make sure that the other side, the side of the Houthis and their Yemeni allies who have been estranged from the UN process by their own decisions for many months, re-engages in the negotiations. We need to have parties there who can do it, including the UN. That is the purpose of the talks, which the United Kingdom has led.

As colleagues have recognised, the only way to end both the humanitarian suffering in the longer term and the conflict is for the parties to agree on it. It is not a military solution; it is a political solution. That is what the United Kingdom has been doing for some months and will continue to do until we get the answer.
Keith Vaz: I thank the Minister for updating the House so regularly and for engaging with the all-party parliamentary group on Yemen and its officers, the hon. Members for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) and for Charnwood (Edward Argar) and me, on these issues.

The meeting of the Quint was yesterday. What is the timetable to mandate the Omanis to bring the Houthis to the negotiating table so that we can conclude this matter? That is the issue, is it not?

Alistair Burt: Again, if we could have a timetable we would have one, but we cannot because we are dealing with people who are not yet parties to this process. They have been and need to be brought back into the process. The only words that can adequately describe it, as the House would wish, are, “As soon as possible.” The Houthis should be re-engaged with the UN in a process to start the descaling that will lead to the end of the conflict. That is what we have been seeking, and that is what we are continuing to do.

I will conclude, because the House has been generous in giving me a great deal of time. I have not, although I could have, said a lot about the direct humanitarian aid that is being delivered by the United Kingdom—that aid is significant and important. We have been working consistently, and £155 million has gone in to support the people of Yemen, and it has been used through indirect agencies, the UN and various non-governmental organisations. I entirely concur with what my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield said about the bravery of those who are engaged, and it would help if the Yemeni Government would pay public health workers in particular. Some of the work that is needed to prevent the return of cholera could then be done, and it would assist food distribution. The aid agencies have worked extremely hard in the circumstances, but the only thing that would allow their work to be effective is an end to the conflict, which we are working so hard to achieve through the negotiations.

Although it has taken some time, and although it is clear how strongly Members present and people outside the House feel about the issue, to believe that there is more the United Kingdom could do is, to a degree, unfair, but it does not matter. We are the Government, and we must do all we can on delivering humanitarian aid, on engaging with the parties who can do something about it and on ensuring that we are on the right side of the law.

Should there be anything in the record that needs correcting, I assure my right hon. Friend that I will correct it. I am confident about what I read out earlier but, if there is anything I need to correct, I will do so. We seek to do what we can in this dreadful situation. The most important thing is that there is a continued release of the restrictions on the ports, which is what we are working towards at the highest level, as Members can tell from the Prime Minister’s speech. If we do not achieve our aims, I know the House will bring us back again.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I thank the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) for securing the debate. I agree with much of what he said—his expertise on the matter is valuable. I also agree with much that the shadow Foreign Secretary said. I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), who is steadfast in his work with the all-party parliamentary group on Yemen, and to the aid agencies that are working in circumstances that are incredibly difficult both for their staff and for the people they are working with in Yemen.

The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield mentioned the difficulties in reporting from Yemen, and I rely heavily on some of the first-hand testimony coming through from Twitter, which seems a reasonable way of getting information out of the country. I mentioned the case of Hisham al-Omeisy in a letter to the Government. He was taken by the Houthis on 12 August 2017 and has yet to be seen again. I ask the Government to do all they can to try to secure the safety of journalists in Yemen.

Today I am missing the opening of the new Silverdale nursery in Dalmarnock. The nursery has 140 places for children under five and, while thinking about Yemen, it struck me that if 140 children in Dalmarnock were to die today, we would do something about it. If they were to die tomorrow, we would do something about it. Some 130 under-fives are dying every day in Yemen. If that were happening in this country, we would do something about it urgently and seriously. We would not have our own children dying from the very preventable cause of extreme malnutrition and disease, which take hold so easily when children do not have the food and resilience they need.

One child is dying every 10 minutes in Yemen. It is shocking even to think of the number who have died since the start of this debate. We cannot accept that any longer; it has been going on for far, far too long, and we have a global responsibility to children, wherever they are, to make sure that they are safe, that they are fed and that they will live a happy and healthy life. Anything we can do to that end we must do urgently.

For the children who survive, the impact will be lasting. Millions of children are, and have been, out of school. They do not have a nursery to go to. They are living with stunting, a lifelong condition that will affect their growth and development, including their cognitive development, throughout the rest of their lives. In 2012, UNICEF was already warning of stunting, saying that 58% of children under five were stunted, and that was before this latest conflict. That is a generation being left with a life-limiting condition that we could do more to prevent.

The International Committee of the Red Cross reported yesterday that it had purchased 750,000 litres of fuel to ensure that the water pumps in Hodeidah and Taiz can operate. Those pumps will last only a month on that fuel. The ICRC also reports that nine other cities do not operate. Those pumps will last only a month on that fuel. The ICRC also reports that nine other cities do not operate.

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One child is dying every 10 minutes in Yemen. It is shocking even to think of the number who have died since the start of this debate. We cannot accept that any longer; it has been going on for far, far too long, and we have a global responsibility to children, wherever they are, to make sure that they are safe, that they are fed and that they will live a happy and healthy life. Anything we can do to that end we must do urgently.
Aid very much needs to get in, and aid agencies say so, but all agencies are also stressing the absolute necessity of getting commercial goods in. The scarcity and fuel prices mean that prices are high, and even where there is food people cannot afford to feed themselves. They do not know where their next meal is coming from. It must be incredibly heartbreaking for people to be able to see food on a shelf but not be able to afford to buy it to feed their family. We must bear in mind that many employees in Yemen have not been paid for some time—over a year in some cases at least. Médecins sans Frontières reported in October that 1.2 million Yemeni civil servants have received little to no salary for more than a year. MSF pays the salaries of 1,200 public health staff that it is using in its clinics, but clearly that is not enough by any manner of means. If the doctors trying to treat the people who are starving have no money to feed themselves either, the situation is a disaster. I urge Ministers to consider what else they can do to get more money in to allow staff to be paid, to get the economy restarted and to make sure people have something to live on.

I also urge, as I have urged following previous statements, that we need to see aid getting into the country in the first place, so the blockade must be removed as soon as possible. But that aid also needs to be able to travel around Yemen, and the border posts, the visas and the difficulties the aid agencies are facing in getting around the country are preventing that flow of aid. It is also clear that the different factions in the conflict are using the system as a means of diverting aid to their own people, so that aid that might be intended to go to one place of desperate need is being diverted. That is not to say that people there might not need it, because I am sure they do, but it is being diverted from the people who need to get it. We need to make sure that it can get through to those who need it and that it is appropriately used when it gets there. I urge Ministers to do anything they can to make sure that aid convoys going through the country can actually get to where they need to be.

Finally, I wish to touch on the issue of arms sales, because they are a crucial part of the influence and leverage our country has in this conflict. Sadly, the communiqué that came out of the Quint meeting concentrated far, far more on weapons and the security situation, which I know and appreciate is difficult, than on the humanitarian situation and the need to get goods in through the ports. I am sure the 25 aid agencies that contacted the Foreign Secretary in their open letter will feel very let down by that, and I echo the shadow Foreign Secretary’s comments about how the attendance list of that meeting could have been broader. Efforts need to be made to get more people from Yemen—from civil society and from organisations working there on the ground—involved in such things. In addition, if we look at the picture from the meeting, we note that there may be the women at the back of the photograph, but women are not being included in this process. We need women as part of the process to help make the peace and make it sustainable.

Alistair Burt: When the national dialogue process was going on—I was out in Yemen for that—we spoke to women and young people who had not been part of the governance process. The national dialogue was giving them an opportunity, but the Houthi involvement and the conflict killed that opportunity. Otherwise, there would have been more women involved—that, I think, is what some of the people are fighting for.

Alison Thewliss: I absolutely appreciate that, and the testimony I heard from some of the aid agencies and women’s organisations that came to visit, meeting the right hon. Member for Leicester East and I some time ago, reflected that. They want to be part of the process. Those organisations do exist, and the Government must keep reaching out to them and keep involving them in that process. If we are to get a lasting peace, it must be a lasting peace for all the people of Yemen; it must be as wide as possible, and the attendance must include those organisations.

We lose a huge amount of credibility in this whole discussion, and we cannot be a broker for peace, while we are involved in arming a side in the conflict. We are complicit in what happens. The Minister mentioned 318 incidents of concern, and he may wish to clarify that. How many more incidents are acceptable to the Government, given that 318 incidents of concern have been picked up by the people involved and the armed forces on the ground in Yemen? That is a huge amount of “concern” to have. The amount of aid that has gone in is welcome, and it is good. The Minister will correct me if I am wrong, but I believe we have put in £202 million in aid since 2015, which is dwarfed by the £4.6 billion in arms sales. A huge amount of money is going into producing absolute brutality and desperation on the ground. If we want the country to be a success, we should be putting all the money and all the effort into rebuilding it, not into destroying what little is still there.

Graham P. Jones: The hon. Lady talks about arms sales, and I accept that we should care about people, but we need to look at the current situation. Is she aware that some 80 rockets have been fired into Saudi Arabia? What is preventing those rockets from killing people is the US Patriot defence missile system. That is defence equipment sold by the US to Saudi Arabia to prevent 80 rockets from landing on ordinary people and killing them. Does she agree with those defence sales?

Alison Thewliss: What I agree with is that we are putting more arms into the situation, which is continuing to escalate it, not—

Graham P. Jones rose—

Alison Thewliss: The hon. Gentleman will have his time later on, as I am sure he will wish to contribute. Adding more weapons to the situation is not going to help. You will be aware, Mr Deputy Speaker, that my daughter has been sent home from nursery sick today. She will be picked up from her nursery by my husband, and she will get medicine, treatment and access to a doctor if she needs it. Unlike parents in Yemen, I will not have to choose which child to save and which child to let die. That is a situation parents in Yemen are facing every single day. Every 10 minutes a child there will die, and parents will have that for the rest of their lives; they will have seen children die before them. We must be committed to finding peace. We must secure, first and foremost, a ceasefire, in order to let aid in. We have had plenty of words, commitments and talk, but Yemen cannot wait. We need action now.
2.18 pm

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): If you will forgive me, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will talk about this country for which I hold a deep affection, having studied Arabic there just over 20 years ago. It is a country of great richness and great culture. In many ways, it is absolutely the heart of Arabia. It is there that the camel was domesticated, which allowed the colonisation of the rest of Arabia. So it is, for most Arabs, very much seen as the heart of the culture; indeed, Yemeni Arabic is seen as the purest—the closest to Koranic Arabic that is currently spoken. So to see the country so ruined, so destroyed is a matter of great sadness for all of us who love Arabian culture, the Arabic language and the Arab people.

We have to be clear about what is causing that destruction. It is absolutely right to say that the blockade on Yemen is wrong—there is no doubt in my mind that Saudi Arabia has a particular responsibility to address the humanitarian concerns facing the Yemeni people today—but it would be wrong to point solely at Riyadh. The decisions being made in Tehran today are having an effect that is being felt throughout the region. It would be wrong to be silent in the face of such aggression, and it would be wrong to ignore the roots of it.

When we look at Zaidi Islam, which as we all know descends from the fifth branch of Shi’a Islam—from the son of the son-in-law of the Prophet, Ali Husayn—it is worth remembering that Iranian involvement in Yemen is nothing new. Indeed, it is said that the Prophet himself was born in the year of the elephant, which is so named because it is the year in which the Shahanshah, the King of Persia, landed elephants in Yemen in order to invade what was then called “Arabia Felix”—happy Arabia.

Since then, Iranian involvement in the region has been frequent, and it is so again today, when the Iranians are landing not war elephants but missiles, small arms and rifles. They are equally poisonous to the politics of that region of Arabia today as they have been for nearly two millennia. Just because it is true that Saudi Arabia’s treatment of the Yemeni people today is not acceptable, that does not mean that we should ignore the crimes being committed by Iran.

I urge the Minister, who has done so much for the region—he has done so much not only for the countries and our relationships with them, but for the people themselves—and who understands so well the countries that make up this beautiful and important part of the world, to remember the history that is playing out. I urge him to remember that we have real friends in the region. We have real friends in Yemen whom, of course, we must help. We have real friends in Saudi Arabia, whom we must help to defend themselves. We have real friends in Oman and in the Emirates who are also fighting against Iranian aggression. As we stand up for our friends, we must urge them to remember that they, too, have a responsibility.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to my friend, the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, for giving way. He referred to the role Iran is playing in Yemen, but are not the Iranians also trying to influence and destabilise other countries on the Arabian peninsula and even trying to increase their influence in Oman?

Tom Tugendhat: The hon. Gentleman, who certainly is a friend, is of course absolutely right. The actions of the Iranian Government over the past few years of the Khomeini-ite dictatorship have been taken to destabilise many areas of the middle east. If one looks at Oman today, one can see the actions of Iranian-backed insurgencies. If one looks at Bahrain today, one can see violent insurgencies, rather than just the political groups that one sees in Oman. Look at the eastern seaboard of Saudi Arabia. I am not going to praise the Saudis for their treatment of the Shi’as in eastern Saudi Arabia, around Dhahran, because frankly it is not great, but bearing in mind the way the Iranian Government are seeking to radicalise Shi’a groups in eastern Saudi Arabia, it is right of the Government in Riyadh to see threats coming from the east. They are right, because that is what is happening.

All that does not excuse the human rights abuses of the blockade. It does not excuse the famine and punishment that is being made collective against the whole people of Yemen, and I will not excuse it, but we must remember that this is a war being fought against an aggressive regime that has several times now fired missiles at Riyadh and at civilian populations in Saudi Arabia. The hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) is absolutely right that the death of the children in Yemen is a crime that cries out for justice, but we must also remember that if Iranian weapons were being landed in Glasgow, we would take action. If Iranian weapons were being fired from France into London, we would take action. I understand that the Saudis are right to take action about it.

Of course, we would not practice collective punishment, we would not blockade and we would not abuse human rights to defend ourselves. We must understand that although there is a legitimacy of Saudi action, as friends of Saudi Arabia and supporters of the welcome changes that are happening in that country today, we have a role and a right to speak out. I welcome the words of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to Mohammad Bin Salman only a few hours ago. She is absolutely right, and she speaks for the United Kingdom with passion and honour when she calls on him to act, and to act now.

2.25 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) not only on securing this debate but on his powerful speech. I associate myself with his remarks. I shall resist the temptation to address some of the broader political questions that have come up during the debate so far and focus on the sheer scale of the humanitarian crisis, and particularly the impact of the blockade. I join the right hon. Gentleman and other speakers, including the Minister, in paying tribute to all those who are working on the ground to try to make a difference in this terrible situation, including the United Nations, aid agencies, the Department for International Development and, above all of course, the long-suffering people of Yemen.

The scale of the crisis is enormous. As we have heard, Yemen could be just weeks away from a once-in-a-generation famine. The UN estimates that 85% of Yemen’s population is in immediate need of humanitarian assistance. That has increased over just the past 12 months by
2 million people. Some 10 million people are at immediate risk of death, and our own Department for International Development says that they “may not survive if they do not receive humanitarian assistance” in some form or another.

It is difficult to get fully accurate figures from sources on the ground, or elsewhere, of the precise human cost of this tragic conflict. It would be very useful if the Minister was able to give us an estimate of how many civilian lives have already been lost since the conflict in Yemen began. As the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield reminded us, Yemen has long been reliant on imports for its food. Even before the war, nearly 90% of Yemen’s food was imported. Yemen requires monthly food imports of 350,000 metric tonnes, of which 80% comes through the two ports of Hodeidah and Saleef. While the ports were fully blockaded, no goods were coming in at all, leaving a dangerous and deadly backlog.

Since the full blockade began three weeks ago, the situation has got even worse. Cholera is widespread, with a suspected 1 million cases and at least 2,000 deaths. As well as having one of the largest recorded cholera outbreaks since records began, Yemen is facing the threat of diphtheria, an extremely contagious and deadly disease, the symptoms of which include high temperatures, difficulty breathing and a sore throat. Around one in 10 adults who contract diphtheria will die; for children, the proportion is closer to one in five.

In this country, we have almost eradicated diphtheria. Since 2010, the UK has recorded 20 cases, with one tragic recorded fatality. That is in the past seven years; in the past two months, Yemen has reported 120 cases, with 14 fatalities, and the numbers are rising. Given how contagious the disease is, it is surely only a matter of time, unless something changes dramatically, before hundreds, if not thousands, of Yemeni people contract diphtheria, with devastating consequences for that country.

The life-saving medication and humanitarian aid that is used to treat these diseases has been withheld from innocent civilians as a direct consequence of the Saudi blockade. Even with the modest easing over the past week, about which we heard from the Minister, lives remain at risk. As has been said, before the blockade, 17 million Yemenis—more than 60% of the population—were food insecure, with an estimated 7 million at immediate risk of famine. That represents a 20% increase over the last year. Half a million children were suffering from severe, acute malnutrition. Last week, the Famine Early Warning Systems Network released an alert saying that “famine is likely in Yemen if key ports remain closed.” That is why this issue of the blockade is so important. The report went on to say that “if the ports remain closed or if the ports are unable to handle large quantities of food, famine is likely with thousands of deaths each day due to lack of food and the outbreak of disease.”

Four governorates in Yemen have malnutrition rates above the emergency threshold and seven others exceed the threshold of “serious”.

**Stephen Twigg** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend has been a consistent and powerful advocate on behalf of the Yemeni people, including the diaspora living in his own constituency. I absolutely agree with him and take the opportunity of his intervention to pay tribute to DFID, both for its longer-term involvement in Yemen, which pre-dates the conflict, and for the work that it has sought to do during the current crisis.

As of Monday, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reported that 29 vessels carrying food and fuel had been denied entry. As the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield said, over the weekend, the Saudi coalition did allow a single ship into the port of Hodeidah. That ship was carrying 6,000 tonnes of flour, which roughly equates to 10 million loaves of bread for the nearly 21 million people on the brink of starvation. Clearly, it is not enough, and the people who are being punished are the innocent civilians of Yemen.

A number of ships are now in the holding area off the Red sea ports, carrying crucial supplies, including ships with nearly 170,000 metric tonnes of desperately needed food. Last night, a vessel carrying 30,000 metric tonnes of wheat was able to berth. However, four vessels carrying fuel and three carrying food are still waiting for permission to dock. I urge the Government to use their good offices to ensure that those vessels carrying desperately needed supplies are able to berth in Hodeidah as soon as possible.

As others have said during the debate, fuel remains at the centre of the ongoing crisis in Yemen. Only two of the ships currently off Yemen are carrying petrol. Farmers in Yemen are reporting that they simply do not have enough fuel to run the agricultural equipment, which further compounds the risk of famine. What little fuel is left in Yemen is being sold at extortionate prices. Humanitarian organisations carried out an assessment, which suggested that a minimum of 1 million litres of fuel are needed for non-governmental organisations to operate at their pre-blockade level.

The two ships with fuel have enough petrol to last just 16 days. Estimates from Sana’a suggest that, unless something changes, petrol will run out in six days and diesel in 17 days. If that happens, the people will suffer even more, with hospitals and waste treatment facilities not being able to function properly. Without fuel, many of the humanitarian supplies waiting off Yemen will not have the opportunity, even if they can dock, to be moved around the country.

It is estimated that, within days, 8 million people will be without running water as the fuel required to pump the water runs out. Safe water and sanitation are vital to combating the outbreaks of cholera and diphtheria. Yemen’s three largest cities have had to shut down their water and sewage treatment facilities and a further five cities will do so within days. In Hodeidah, untreated water and sewage has been washing up into the streets for several days now.
As the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) said in her excellent speech, the International Committee of the Red Cross took the very unusual step this week of buying fuel stocks to help to restart the water and sewage treatment facilities in Yemen’s second and third largest cities—Hodeidah and Taiz. However, given the extortionate price of fuel, they were able to buy only enough supplies to last a month. May I praise the ICRC for doing that? It acknowledges that it was an unusual but necessary step to help the people of Yemen. I now implore the Government to do all they can to work with NGOs and others on the ground to ensure that much-needed fuel gets into and around Yemen as soon as possible.

As we have heard, health facilities have been destroyed during the conflict: one in six has been completely destroyed and barely half are functional at all. Many have had to close because of the lack of access to clean water. Only 30% of the required medical supplies are getting into Yemen. As a result, many diseases go untreated, compounding an already horrific situation. Although vaccines are slowly making their way back into Yemen through aid flights, much, much more needs to be done to ensure that the entire population is protected against diseases that are both preventable and curable.

On Saturday, I will be taking part in a vigil for Yemen in Liverpool. I am delighted that my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden), is here, and I know that he will be joining the vigil with members of the Yemeni diaspora in Liverpool. It is so important that we send a clear message that this conflict is not forgotten. When I speak to the Yemeni diaspora in Liverpool, it is clear that the one thing that they want is peace in Yemen. They recognise that that will be achieved through diplomatic means.

I welcome the fact that the Prime Minister is in the region. It is vital that she presses loudly and clearly for the full lifting of this blockade. This debate today is timely and important. The message is clear that the blockade must be lifted immediately, but we recognise that even the lifting of the blockade, vital as that is, is far from sufficient. We need to keep coming back in this House to the issue of Yemen until we see a ceasefire, a cessation of hostilities. Without that, we will indeed face the worst humanitarian disaster in decades. The solution is the only way forward: a lifting of the blockade, a cessation of hostilities. Without that, we are talking of 17 million food insecure people. The World Food Programme is giving food and vouchers to around 6.5 million people across most of the country. Obviously this has been hampered over the last three weeks due to the blockade. Thankfully, that horror is now over and ships are docking. Remember that even pre-crisis Yemen was almost entirely dependent on food imports.”

He goes on:

“The blockade only served to make food a weapon of war. The World Food Programme expects that 3 million of the 17 million will be pushed into a deeper level of food insecurity as a result of the blockade. Market availability is acceptable but remains inaccessible due to inflation”—hence the high prices.

He goes on:

“Cholera I believe is stabilising but still at around 800,000 people. It is the largest outbreak in modern history and utterly shameful.”

I will not go into the statistics, because the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby has done so already.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Like the hon. Gentleman, I have had letters from constituents voicing grave concerns about the situation in Yemen, particularly the blockade, food shortages and lack of medical supplies, so I agree wholeheartedly that something has to be done.

Jeremy Lefroy: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. There is a huge lack of critical medical supplies, including vaccines and treatments to control the spread of cholera, and now of course that deadly disease, diphtheria.

I come to the second of my quotations from an eyewitness—Mark Lowcock, the emergency relief co-ordinator, whom the Chairman of the International Development Committee, I and several other colleagues met a couple of weeks ago. After a visit earlier this month, he said:

“Everywhere I went, I saw roads, bridges, factories, hotels, and houses that had been destroyed by bombing or shelling... I visited hospitals... Both had barely any electricity or water... I met seven-year-old Nora. She weighs 11 kg – the average weight for a two-year-old, not a seven-year-old. Dr. Khaled, the manager of Al Thawra hospital, where she is being treated, said staff there regularly turn away gravely ill malnourished children because they cannot accommodate them.”

There is, of course, a solution. I believe that a political solution is the only way forward: a lifting of the blockade, a cessation of hostilities. Without that, we will indeed face the worst humanitarian disaster in decades. The numbers sometimes seem almost too vast. There are other consequences as well.

I will quote again, finally, from the OCHA report, about a widow and mother of six—five daughters and a son—who

“had to abandon her home in... At Taiziah district in Taizz governorate, fleeing airstrikes and fighting in the area. The family left their village with only the clothes they were wearing, and settled in a nearby, somewhat more peaceful village. Uloom rented a small shop, but the business is struggling and cannot sustain the family’s basic needs such as food, water and medicines. To ease the burden, Uloom decided to marry off her three young daughters.
I didn’t have money and couldn’t feed all of the children’, she said. ‘I didn’t want to marry off my daughters so young, but I couldn’t stand them crying and starving. I regret what I did very much’.

That is one of the desperate individual human consequences of what we are seeing now.

Yesterday, I had the honour of chairing in Speaker’s House a meeting at which we discussed the tremendous progress made on countering malaria over the last 17 years. Millions of lives, including children’s lives, have been saved. Here we have an entirely preventable disaster looming. Tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of lives, perhaps even more, mainly of children and women, are at risk. We have the opportunity to act globally. I ask that the coalition, the Government of Saudi Arabia and their allies lift the blockade immediately to ensure that those lives can be saved. I thank the Prime Minister for what she said yesterday and today, and I urge the Government to continue in their efforts, day in, day out, until the crisis is resolved.

2.43 pm

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy). He did himself a huge injustice in saying that he did not know much about the subject; he knows a great deal, and his passion was evident in what he said. I thank him for his remarks. I also commend the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), not only for calling this debate but for his incredible work as International Development Secretary. I think that he will go down as one of the best we have ever had. While he occupied that post, he did so much for Yemen and gave it so much of his time, for which we were very grateful. He gave a brilliant speech today.

It is important that we discuss Yemen on the Floor of the House. We do not get the opportunity to do so often enough. As chair of the all-party group on Yemen, and as one of two Members born in Aden, I believe that this has become a forgotten war, as the Foreign Secretary said. Allowing us to discuss this in prime parliamentary time means that it is forgotten no more.

I thank the hon. Members for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) and for Charnwood (Edward Argar) for being such excellent officers of the all-party group. Yemen has very many friends in the House. This is a Thursday afternoon, but the House is packed. I also thank the young and swashbuckling Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, who learned about Yemen when he went to live there to learn Arabic, and who spoke beautifully about its contribution to the history of the Arab world, and of course my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), who has made such a tremendous contribution in his role as Chair of the International Development Select Committee. I miss Flick Drummond and Angus Robertson. Both, whenever they spoke about Yemen, made sure the House listened, and I am glad that the shadow Foreign Secretary, who is extremely busy, came to speak today. It shows that she is very concerned.

As we approach 20 December and the 1,000th day of Yemen’s war, it is clear that the conflict is still no closer to being resolved, and the United Kingdom is sadly no nearer to developing a coherent policy on Yemen. Time and again, I and others have stood in the Chamber calling for our Government to utilise all their immense diplomatic skills, talent and muscle to bring an end to the conflict, but it has not happened, and we are here again asking for the same thing. This debate demonstrates the cross-party consensus in Parliament for an end to this awful war.

As we stand here today, Yemen continues to bleed to death. Yemenis face death from cholera, malnutrition, bombing and starvation. The cloud of death hangs over Yemen: 10,000 dead from the fighting, 40,000 mutilated; each day, 130 Yemeni children dying from preventable causes. As the hon. Member for Glasgow Central said, by the time this debate ends, another 17 Yemeni children will have died. Some 20 million people are in need of urgent humanitarian aid. By the end of the year, 1 million people will be suffering from cholera, which is more than the entire populations of Edinburgh, Newcastle and Hull combined.

The war has destroyed Yemen’s civilian infrastructure. Its hospitals—including the one where I and my sisters were born—and water sanitation facilities have been decimated by the fighting and bombing. As we have heard, state sector workers have not been paid for well over a year, and aid agencies have been asked to fulfil all major functions of the state. It is an impossible task.

The all-party parliamentary group on Yemen will be launching its inquiry into UK policy towards Yemen on 13 December—on Yemen day, to be held here in Parliament. We will hear contributions from all the agencies that have been taking part in this action of mercy: Médecins sans Frontiéres, Oxfam, Islamic Relief, the Norwegian Refugee Council, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the International Rescue Committee. I hope that many Members of the House, especially those representing the diaspora in Cardiff, Liverpool, Sheffield and elsewhere will come to Yemen day because it will allow us not just to grieve but to press for the action that, I am afraid, is still lacking.

The conflict in Yemen has raged for the past two and a half years, but there has been a sharp escalation this month. On 4 November, an Iranian-supplied missile was fired at Saudi Arabia from Houthis-controlled territory in Yemen, landing near Riyadh airport. We condemn this missile attack in the strongest possible terms. One death is not a justification for another, and targeting civilians at an airport is a cowardly act. The response by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to this attack has been quick and deadly, increasing bombing raids in Yemen and issuing a full blockade of the country. Despite an outcry from humanitarian groups and the United Nations, the full blockade lasted for three weeks. We have heard the passionate arguments that this is in breach of article 33 of the Geneva convention.

Although I welcome the ending of the blockade announced this week, acknowledge that the start of the aid has begun and welcome the update given to us by the Minister today, this is not a solution to Yemen’s problems. Aid access to the country is still far lower than is required by the 20 million people who need immediate assistance. Yemen is a country that imports 90% of its food. Restrictions on commercial imports are still present, while Yemeni citizens are starving to death. A return to the pre-November status quo is an unacceptable outcome. It is clear that the only way to stop the suffering of the Yemeni people is with a peace agreement between the parties, and I will not rest until there is peace in Yemen.
In recent months, I have been meeting some of the key interlocutors in the region. Six months ago, I went to Oman and Doha to meet Ministers there. I was on my way back to Aden, but never made it. I was told that if I landed at the airport, there was no guarantee that the plane would take off again. I have also meet the ambassador from Iran to the United Kingdom, Hamid Baedinejad, who told me that Iran was not involved in Yemen and that Iran wanted peace. But in recent weeks, I have meet the Saudi ambassador, Mohammed bin Nawai bin Abdulaziz, and the Saudi Foreign Minister, Adel bin Ahmed al-Jubeir, both of whom wanted peace and both of whom made it very clear that Iran was involved in supplying arms actively to the Houthis. I think we all have to accept that it is clear that that is the case.

The United Kingdom has the capacity to end this conflict as the penholder of the United Nations. It is good to see what the Prime Minister said in Riyadh today, and that she is there to address the Yemeni issue, but I would like her to stay in the region until she gets everyone back at the peace table. A speech is welcome, but it is not enough. We need to get people back and this is a huge opportunity. There is a clarion call for peace all over the world. Three weeks ago at the United States Congress, Democrat Ro Khanna and Republican Congressman Mark Pocan introduced a bipartisan Bill concerning arms sales to Saudi Arabia. Last week, the Leader of the Opposition wrote to the Prime Minister, calling for arms sales to Saudi Arabia to be suspended, and the Scottish National party has had this position for some time. On no other issue except Yemen would we see an alliance that brings together the United States Congress, the Leader of the Opposition and the Scottish National party.

Yesterday, after a long wait, the Foreign Ministers of the UK, the USA, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Oman met in the Quint meeting. But there is no timetable for peace. Unless we have a timetable, we cannot get peace. The Foreign Secretary tweeted a picture of himself after the meeting yesterday. My message to him is that we need to spend less time talking about Brexit and more time talking about Yemen. His predecessor, Lord Hague, took an active role in the peace process. Six months ago, I went to Oman and Doha to meet Ministers there. I was on my way back to Aden, but never made it. I was told that if I landed at the airport, there was no guarantee that the plane would take off again. I have also met the ambassador from Iran to the United Kingdom, Hamid Baedinejad, who told me that Iran was not involved in Yemen and that Iran wanted peace. But in recent weeks, I have met the Saudi ambassador, Mohammed bin Nawai bin Abdulaziz, and the Saudi Foreign Minister, Adel bin Ahmed al-Jubeir, both of whom wanted peace and both of whom made it very clear that Iran was involved in supplying arms actively to the Houthis. I think we all have to accept that it is clear that that is the case.

I thank the Minister for the Middle East for his work on the issue. He is always willing to meet, engage and come to Parliament in order to update us.

There was a slight dispute between the Minister and the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield. The Minister has known him for 30 years, and I have known him for 40 years; he is responsible for my entering politics because he gave me my first speech at university, and I have not stopped since, so he is to blame. However, the fact is that the Saudi Foreign Minister did tell us that the British were there to help them with targeting the bombing. The Minister was not there, but that is exactly what the Foreign Minister said we were doing, and he thanked us for it. Maybe clarification is required on exactly what that means, but I must defend the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield: that is exactly what we all heard.

Mr Deputy Speaker, you will know that this is my 30th year in Parliament. Some may say that is too long, but for my remaining years in this place, I want to dedicate myself to ensuring that there is peace in Yemen. I cannot bear to think of what is happening to this once beautiful country—it fills me with such pain. The images broadcast by the BBC and al-Jazeera this week are just too harrowing to watch. My children had to turn away from the television set, it was so terrible. One day, I want to return to Aden and to have breakfast on the veranda of the Crescent Hotel, overlooking the Arabian sea, where my sisters and I spent so many happy days as children, watching the great ships on their way to the Suez canal.

This is no biblical disaster, but a disaster that has been made by men. In a recent letter to the Prime Minister, I suggested that just as parliamentarians of the 20th century were judged on their reactions to the genocides in Rwanda, Kosovo and Somalia, we will be judged on our reactions to the tragedy in Yemen. Once fabled as the land of the Queen of Sheba, Yemen is now the graveyard of the middle east, and our lack of action is an object of shame for all of us. Unless we act now, the verdict of history will be very harsh indeed.

2.56 pm

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) on securing this important debate.

It has been nearly 1,000 days since the Yemen crisis started—1,000 days of suffering for the people of Yemen. Two days ago, in an attempt to help to alleviate that suffering and to reinforce what must be an unimaginable effort of humanitarian work, a UN-chartered aid ship docked in the west Yemeni port of Hodeidah. Until this crisis is resolved and the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels are defeated, we must strive to ensure that access to support humanitarian work is the norm and not the exception.

I welcome the fact that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has met the Saudi Government to raise those very concerns. The United Kingdom is one of the five largest bilateral aid donors to Yemen. We should be proud that the UK is leading the global response, with £155 million of UK funding providing people with food, clean water, sanitation and nutritional support. A further £8 million is being allocated to tackle the spread of cholera.

The people of Yemen are facing a horrendous famine, one that we must bring to an end. With 70% of the population requiring urgent aid, the blockade must be rolled back as much as is practical to ensure that vital assistance reaches those who need it. Without unconstrained access to shipments, hospitals will be without power, leaving the sick and injured without vital medical care, and Yemeni people could experience a long and devastating famine. We cannot allow this to happen.

I welcome the fact that the UK proposed and co-ordinated the UN Security Council presidential statement calling for uninterrupted access for humanitarian assistance into Yemen, and that the Government continue to lobby for Yemen to remain open to humanitarian access.

While I accept the necessity for the UK, alongside our allies in the US and France, to provide vital logistical and intelligence support to Saudi Arabia, which continues to lead a broad international coalition of countries from across the region, that must not come at the expense of many lives, which have been, and will continue to be, lost if this blockade continues.
I am pleased that the UK Government have already taken the lead by lobbying others in the international community, including at the United Nations, to ensure that humanitarian access is granted as rapidly as possible. The UK must continue to use its influence to ensure that all parties respect these clear, unified demands from around the globe.

I continue to urge the Government to make that a priority—to act and to ensure that aid reaches those in need, and to help bring about a long-lasting solution to a long-standing crisis, so that once more the people of Yemen may live safely in their country and in their homes without fear.

3 pm

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) for obtaining the debate. It is important that we debate this issue, and do so frequently, such is the scale of the catastrophe. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), the Chair of the International Development Committee, for his speech, which was very illuminating, very focused, and spoke to the heart of the problem.

There are two issues—today’s crisis and tomorrow’s crisis. I believe there is a consensus in the House that today’s crisis—the blockade—must end. We must help the people of Yemen right now, irrespective of all the other issues. This is about life and death and nothing else, and that is what we should be focused on. In today’s crisis, it is imperative that the UK Government, other Governments, and all our agencies, bring pressure to bear so that the blockade is lifted, allowing aid into Yemen, so that those people in Yemen can be relieved of their suffering.

Some issues transcend today’s crisis and tomorrow’s crisis, and the blame for them cannot be laid at anyone’s door—local warlords; fights over economic assets, including oil, within the country; roadblocks; illegal taxes; theft of aid. It is a complex situation, which we must understand and in order to prevent tomorrow’s crisis, because we do not want a crisis tomorrow. We must try to resolve the situation in Yemen so that the country has a future and is not in eternal crisis. That requires the conditions that people have spoken about—primarily, it requires peace. In requiring peace, and if we are to find a long-term solution, we must look at the circumstances that led to what is happening now.

I will mention some important issues that have not been raised. The Gulf Co-operation Council and the Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, were the largest donors to Yemen. They remain so today, and will continue to be so in the future. What dwarfs that fact is that what Yemen really needs is a better relationship with Saudi Arabia. The border is currently closed because of the Houthis; one of the biggest elements of Yemen’s economy is the remittances from the 1.5 million Yemeni workers who work in Saudi Arabia. They no longer work in Saudi Arabia because of this conflict; they are victims of it. Open trade has ended. The economy in Yemen is suffering. We need a relationship between Saudi Arabia—the principal partner of Yemen—and Yemen, and that is part of the future. That is part of the peace-building process.

But what has led to this conflict, and why has Saudi Arabia taken the action that it has? Although I do not agree with the blockade, I believe that we need to understand the motivation for it. Many speakers have referred to the rocket fired on 4 November, but that is only one rocket. I thought there were 54, but I am now told—and I stand to be corrected—that there have been 80 rockets. The original rockets, with a range of 1,000 km, were Scuds provided by North Korea, but we now understand that in the latest development, the rockets that are being provided into the area or supplied to the Houthis are Iranian-made—they are coming from Tehran.

If we are to resolve this situation, there needs to be demilitarisation. UN resolution 2216, which is at the heart of this, says that the Houthis must withdraw from all occupied areas; that they must relinquish all arms and military assets; that they must refrain from provocation; and that they must enter peace talks, and there are sanctions on individuals because of the actions that they have taken in the name of the Houthi-Saleh alliance. Let us look at what happened when resolution 2216 went through the United Nations, which has 15 voting members. We say that there is no alliance, and we talk about chaos, but the world was clear. Fourteen members voted for the resolution, and only one member—the Russian Federation—abstained, presumably on the principle of the intervention in Syria. No members voted against. The world was united in condemning the Houthis.

Incursions are among the provocations that Saudi Arabia faces. As I mentioned in an intervention, on the internet there are a plethora of videos showing Houthis engaging in extreme violence—killing Saudi Arabian citizens, attacking schools and killing Saudi Arabian armed forces personnel—inside Saudi Arabia. A violence surrounds the Houthis.

I was fortunate enough to meet the Iranians at the Inter-Parliamentary Union conference in St Petersburg, where they were asked about the arms that are currently in Yemen. Although the Iranians admitted that there were Iranian arms in Yemen, they said that those arms were being supplied by Hezbollah, not Iran. 

I thought for a moment that the Minister was going to ask me to give way.

There is real concern about the evolving situation in north Yemen and the fact that the Houthis still will not come to the table, even after 70 accords and agreements. An empty chair is waiting for them, and they will not sit in it. They have no excuse for failing to engage with a process that would afford them peace talks and a path to the future prosperity of their people.

Why should we be concerned? In the BBC documentary that was filmed undercover in Sana’a, we see oppression, and we see the posters going up. The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield mentioned children chanting “Death to America”, and said that that was some sort of reprisal. I think he omitted the remainder of the words on those posters and the chant that the schoolchildren were forced to sing. The chant is: “Death to America! Death to Israel! Curses upon the Jews!” I do not see that as a step along the pathway to peace, and I begin to understand why the Houthis’ chair at the table is empty. What has Israel to do with this conflict, and why should there be a curse on the Jews? How is that relevant to this conflict? It is not.

There are many other points I could make, but I want to wrap up and allow others to speak. The Houthis must be forced to come to the table, otherwise we will...
not get peace. Removing the blockade and sending in as much aid as we want may solve today’s crisis, but it will not solve tomorrow’s. Tomorrow’s crisis has to be solved by diplomacy, and that means everybody getting around the table and achieving demilitarisation. People in this House and across the world have to accept and face up to the difficulties in Yemen and start to meet the challenges.

It has been suggested today that the United States should not sell defence missile systems to Saudi Arabia. But the US Patriot missile system is a defence battery, and the 80 missiles fired by the Houthis were shot down by Patriot missile systems supplied by the United States. Is this House really saying that the United States should not have sold the missile defence systems that were used to shoot down the rockets that were fired on 4 November? I do not think so. People need to accept that the situation is very complicated. Finally, we need the Houthis to come to the table.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Although I accept that this debate on Yemen is worthy and important, the two debates that come afterwards—one of which, on RBS and the Global Restructuring Group, I am sponsoring—are also critical. A lot of people on both sides of the House want to speak in the debate that I am sponsoring, and the guillotine as it is today will leave insufficient time to give the subject the due and proper attention. With that in mind, Mr Deputy Speaker, I am prepared to pull my debate if you can speak to the Leader of the House to secure more substantial time for it.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): May I say that I totally agree with the hon. Gentleman? The debate in his name that we were going to come on to is very well subscribed, and I would not want to have to curtail it because I think there is a lot to be said. I think the suggestion being offered to the House is the right one, and I will of course speak to the Leader of the House about it. More to the point, however, I have already spoken to the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, who has assured me that he will make bringing this debate back to the House a priority. I think everybody recognises that we would not want to curtail such an important debate, given the limited amount of time left, so we will absolutely speak to whoever we need to in order to make sure that time for the debate is provided. I thank the hon. Gentleman.

3.9 pm

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) for securing this incredibly important debate. I also thank him for the work he has done in the House and elsewhere in putting Yemen squarely on our agenda, and I pay a similar tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) for all the work he has done and the inquiry that he is shortly to launch.

As we have heard today, even before the conflict, Yemen was the poorest country in the region, but the war has devastated it and its infrastructure. Oxfam has reported that the ports, roads and bridges on the supply routes, along with warehouses, farms and markets have been destroyed by all sides, draining the country’s food stocks. At least 10,000 civilians have already died in the conflict, and at least 40,000 have been injured.

The Saudi blockade started on 5 November, following the firing of a ballistic missile into Saudi territory from Yemen. In response to the missile, Saudi Arabia closed all land, air and sea ports in Yemen, grounded humanitarian flights and stopped all other aid for a number of weeks. The Saudi Government may have partially lifted the blockade, but vital imports of food, fuel and medicines remain severely restricted, particularly in the rebel-held north, which is home to the majority of the population.

There has been no clearance for ships containing fuel, preventing the milling and transportation of food stocks, as well as the operation of generators for health, water and sewerage systems. Humanitarian agencies need at least 1 million litres of fuel each month. Fuel shortages have shut down hospitals, and deprived entire cities of clean water and sanitation.

Aid agencies are gravely concerned about the implications of the blockade on the existing crisis, with starvation and the outbreak of diseases, including cholera and diphtheria. The conflict has had a devastating impact on civilians both directly from the violence on both sides and from its impact on Yemen’s economy and critical services. As we have heard, the country has experienced the largest cholera outbreak in recent history, peaking at almost 900,000 suspected cases.

Let us be clear: Yemen is the world’s worst humanitarian crisis. The country is on the brink of the world’s largest famine, with 80% of the population—20.7 million people—in need of aid. As the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) pointed out so vividly, 130 children die every day in Yemen from hunger or disease, which is the equivalent of a child every few minutes.

These deaths are as senseless as they are preventable. That is the conclusion of Save the Children, which has been working in the country for some time. It has also pointed out the sheer scale of need, with Yemen requiring 350,000 metric tonnes of food imports every month, 80% of which must come through the two ports of Hodeidah and Saleef, which are currently closed.

We have heard a little more this afternoon about the relaxing of the blockades, but according to the information received to date, only a pathetically small amount of aid has got through, compared with the overall scale of need. The country’s stocks of wheat and sugar will not last for longer than a few months without a full lifting of the blockade.

Opposition Members acknowledge that UK aid has been vital—it is really important that it reaches the people on the ground in Yemen—and that DFID has given £155 million. We also need to take time to pay tribute to the NGOs, including Save the Children, Oxfam and Médecins sans Frontières, that are working on the frontline to provide emergency food and other supplies. We should acknowledge their work as an advocate for the region, highlighting some of the devastating consequences not only of the conflict but of the blockade.

Oxfam has described the conflict in Yemen as the forgotten war, so we must acknowledge the important work that the aid agencies are doing in this incredibly difficult situation. Humanitarian support can only meet part of the need. We need commercial shipments to be allowed to continue.

The UK Government are the second largest donor to the UN Yemen appeal, but efforts to address the humanitarian situation and push for political progress
have unfortunately been inconsistent with the ongoing support for the actions of the Saudi-led coalition. The UK is the penholder for Yemen on the UN Security Council, as well as one of the largest donors of humanitarian aid. We are a major arms supplier to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, so we are uniquely placed to demonstrate the political leadership that is needed to bring an end to the crisis in Yemen. I listened closely to what the Minister said this afternoon. Many Opposition Members have a lot of respect for the Minister and the work that he does, but he needs to work harder to ensure that there is not an incoherence between foreign policy on Yemen and Saudi Arabia and DFID's humanitarian policies.

In the last few minutes of my speech I want to say something about what needs to happen now. The UK is a member of the Quint grouping alongside the UAE, Saudi Arabia, the US and Oman, and we led on a UN Security Council presidential statement in June, which called on all parties to engage in peace talks and allow unhindered access for humanitarian supplies. We know that a meeting took place yesterday of the Quint members, and Ministers agreed that all parties had a shared responsibility to ensure safe, rapid and unhindered access for goods and humanitarian personnel. Ministers said that they would back “a redoubling of efforts to reach a political solution which remains the only route to ending the conflict and addressing security threats to Yemen's neighbours. Ministers recognised the need for all sides to show flexibility and abandon pre-conditions and called on the Houthis and their allies to engage the UN Special Envoy Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed on the political process. The Ministers agreed that this urgent issue would necessitate them meeting and consulting regularly to coordinate approaches and identify concrete steps leading to a political settlement.”

The difficulty we have today is that we do not know what any of that means, so I have a few asks of the Minister. Can we have a lot more information about what the statements made after the meeting yesterday will mean in practice, including a timescale? Will the Government use their considerable leverage to ensure that the Saudi blockade is lifted immediately to let humanitarian aid flow? Will they put more effort into a new UN resolution to condemn what is going on in Yemen and ensure that progress can be made? Will the Government do all they can to ensure greater transparency about what is happening in Yemen, including greater access for aid agencies and the media?

We in this House should not put Yemen on the “too difficult” pile and get bogged down in the origins of the conflict. We should concentrate our efforts on alleviating the huge distress being caused to people in that country and work towards a political solution.

3.19 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): “A catastrophe of biblical proportions” was the phrase used by the right hon. Gentleman for having secured it—is that we could extract the word “Yemen” and replace it with “Syria” in so many circumstances. The two conflicts are very different, but the suffering, pain, misery and death are all too familiar in debates such as this. It is important for us not to become desensitised and that, as the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) said, we do not put Yemen into the “too difficult” box.

The other thing that alarms me—this also has parallels with Syria—is the weaponisation of food, leading to some of the most horrifying tales of hunger and deprivation, and medieval-style outbreaks of disease that are killing people in their hundreds of thousands.

I do not want to take up too much time, so I shall wind up my remarks with this point. The Prime Minister is in the region right now, as the House debates this issue. It has been said that she has raised and will raise the issue of Yemen. Of course, I would prefer she did that than otherwise—it is at least a start. But it is only a start. Like many right hon. and hon. Members, I am tired of hearing about Government Ministers raising things; I do not quite know what that means sometimes.

My first debate in the House two years ago was about the case of Raif Badawi, an imprisoned Saudi writer, and the broader issue of human rights in Saudi Arabia. I remember consulting some of the researchers from the House of Commons Library, who told me at the time that it was sometimes known for Ministers to raise issues not by verbalising their views, but by writing things on sheets of paper and holding them up so that they could be read by other people in the room.

Alistair Burt indicated dissent.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The Minister shakes his head; I would not dream of accusing him of doing anything like that; I respect him as a thoughtful, good Minister. But it is about time we started to see some action. The Prime Minister should not return from her trip until she has secured something in respect of the blockade of Yemen.

Right hon. and hon. Members have mentioned arms sales to Saudi Arabia, and my party leader has also raised the issue with the Prime Minister. We get billions in arms sales to Saudi Arabia, which fill up the coffers of the Exchequer with tax receipts, yet we spend only millions on aid. I accept that we are one of the biggest donors—that, of course, is to be commended—but the aid is bastardised by the fact that we are facilitating the shelling of the very people whom we are trying to help with the aid. We find ourselves in the most perverse situation. Although I do not blame this Minister in particular for that, the situation seems to characterise British foreign policy in not only this conflict but many political situations in which we have been involved for a great many years.

I commend the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield for securing the debate, and for all the work that he does, along with the chair of the all-party group—the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), who is no longer in the Chamber—and my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss). How much better might it be if the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield occupied the chair of the Foreign Secretary at the Cabinet table, rather than the person who occupies it now?
3.24 pm

Alistair Burt: With the leave of the House, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will respond. I will take no more than the two minutes allotted to me, so that my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) can make some closing remarks. I thank him again for raising the issue. I also thank other colleagues for the way in which they have dealt with the debate and the constructive way in which nearly all of them spoke.

We are agreed that we want immediate access for humanitarian and commercial aid to the ports in Yemen. I do not want to dance on the head of a pin when it comes to the word “blockade”: that is what colleagues have called it in the House, and that is what it is. There are international rules governing whether something is a blockade. International humanitarian law prevents the starvation of civilians “as a method of warfare”, and that includes blockading with the intent of causing starvation. The publicly made statement by the Saudis was that their intent is not to cause starvation but to ensure that missiles do not enter Yemen. I would be failing in my duty if I did not put that on the record, and, as we have seen, there has been an easing in recent days.

What we are all agreed on, however, is first that we want that greater access, and secondly that we want an end to the conflict. I have sought to assure colleagues that we are straining every sinew in our efforts to assist in a process of which we are not fully in control, and in which not all parties are yet engaged in the same way as the coalition parties are engaged with the UN.

Finally, let me commend my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development, who has made securing access to humanitarian aid one of her top priorities in Yemen. We have been feeding millions of people, and we are determined to continue to do so. We are providing food for 1.8 million people for at least a month, nutritional support for 1.7 million people, and water and sanitation for 1.2 million. The country is doing what it can on the aid side. As we all know, however, commercial access has to be granted. We need more food; we need an end to the urgency of the situation. We also need to support those who are trying to ensure that a legitimate Government are protected against those from outside and from internal insurgency. We need to bend all our efforts to resolving the conflict, and the United Kingdom will do so to the very best of its ability.

3.27 pm

Mr Mitchell: I will not take up much of the House’s time, Mr Deputy Speaker.

This has been a most useful debate. I think that there is agreement across the House on two key things. First, the British Government must do everything they can to ensure that the blockade is lifted, because it is a breach of international humanitarian law. It is a collective punishment beating for the 27 million people who live in Yemen, and it must be lifted. Secondly—and here the British Government have a most important role to play—a political process that is inclusive must get going. Those are the two key messages that I hope the Minister will take back to the Foreign Office today.

In different ways, nearly every speaker on both sides of the House drew attention to the fault line in the Government’s current policy, and it was set out with exemplary clarity by the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) a few moments ago. It makes those two objectives more difficult to achieve, but they are the objectives that I hope the Minister will take away with him, and the whole House will wish him all success in achieving them.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the current situation in Yemen.

Ross Thomson: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Tomorrow the House is due to debate the Second Reading of a private Member’s Bill, the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill. Unfortunately I was unable to find a copy this morning, because the Bill was being reprinted as it contained an error. The error was that Scotland had been omitted from it.

I am told that the Bill is being reprinted to include Scotland, and that it will be available at some point today. May I ask whether the House will be able to debate it tomorrow, given that printed copies have not been made available in good time? May I also ask whether you understand, Mr Deputy Speaker, that Her Majesty’s official Opposition no longer consider Scotland to be important enough to be named alongside England, Wales and Northern Ireland in important pieces of potential legislation?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): The hon. Gentleman was doing all right until the end of his remarks, when he ruined a very good point of order. The Opposition are not in charge of printing, so I think the hon. Gentleman will regret the comments he added on to the end, as there was no need to make them. However, it is important that we get things right, and there has been a printing error. We will be able to hold the debate tomorrow, however; I can reassure the hon. Gentleman of that—do not book a flight, as we will be here tomorrow. The debate will take place, and Scotland is included. This was just a printing error, so we need not worry and should not try to make political points out of what was a very good point of order up until then.

One of the Backbench Business Committee debates has been withdrawn, so we will now debate the motion on mental health and suicide within the autism community.
Autism Community: Mental Health and Suicide

3.30 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the support available for autistic people experiencing mental health problems; calls on the Government to ensure that the NICE-recommended indicator for autism in GP registers is included in the Quality and Outcomes Framework; and further calls on the Government to ensure NHS England works closely with the autism community to develop effective and research-based mental health pathway.

I thank everyone across the House, no matter what side of the Chamber they sit on, who supported the application for this important debate to the Backbench Business Committee. It is truly a cross-party endeavour to raise the profile of this issue, awareness of mental health issues within the autism community, difficulties about access to services, the importance of funding adequate support, and the progress we all must make across the UK for this population.

I thank the many autism charities, mental health charities and research groups that have reached out to me over the past few weeks.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady join me in thanking the Whole Autism Family, a charity run by Anne-Marie and Martin Kilgallion in my constituency, who have two autistic boys and who do so much to support other families, who can find it difficult to access medical and other healthcare?

Dr Cameron: I thank the hon. Lady for her important words. The bedrock of much of the work undertaken across the UK is such small charities, often run by those who have personal experience and know what works and what needs to be done.

The level of interest in the debate shows the importance of the issue. It is important to so many across the UK, including charities such as those already mentioned. Many charities have contacted me with important recommendations, including Autistica, the National Autistic Society, the Royal College of Psychiatrists and the British Psychological Society.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. Will she join me in congratulating women’s organisations in Coventry that are very much involved in mental health issues among younger people and older people in particular? What help can they get? Often, women act as carers and the Government should do something about that and give proper grants to those organisations.

Dr Cameron: That is an extremely important point. We must bear it in mind that for young people with autistic spectrum disorder, there is often a family-systemic approach, with carers at the forefront of providing support, and they need the best resources possible.

I also want to extend a personal warm welcome to the youth patrons up in the Gallery today representing Ambitious About Autism. Their recent campaign and research project, “Know your normal”, has been helping many people and raising important awareness. I pay specific thanks to the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) and the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan), who have worked tremendously hard on this debate, on behalf of people with autistic spectrum disorder, through the all-party group over many years.

As a psychologist, I know that progress has been made on autism and mental health over the many years since I started in 1990, when waiting lists were extremely long—possibly a year and more—and services were very limited. However, much more must be done across the United Kingdom.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I accept the point that the hon. Lady is making, but I have to tell her that waiting lists in Durham are still two years long.

Dr Cameron: That is an excellent point, and that situation is clearly unacceptable. The Scottish Government and the United Kingdom Government are introducing waiting times initiatives across the United Kingdom. We are finding that the experience on the ground for young people with autism and their families, and indeed across the lifespan, is that, despite the waiting times initiatives, the waiting times that are expected to be in place are not the reality. We need to address that issue seriously.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Does the hon. Lady agree that mental health issues for adults with autism can arise out of the way in which they are treated when they encounter the criminal justice system? The behaviours that sometimes accompany autism can be misinterpreted by people in the criminal justice system. Does she agree that we need not only to get the health provision right but to ensure that the people working in the criminal justice system understand about autism and take it into account when they meet adults with the condition?

Dr Cameron: Yes, I wholeheartedly agree with that point. I have personal clinical experience of that through working across a variety of secure hospitals and prisons in my practice with the NHS. People with autistic spectrum disorder often find themselves caught up in the criminal justice system, which has little awareness of their needs or of the support that they require. When they get caught up in the system, it is difficult for them to move on and rehabilitate because the provision simply is not there.

Mr Jim Cunningham: Following on from the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), there is an argument that the police lack the training to handle some of these young people because they do not understand the nature of their mental illness. Does the hon. Lady agree that something needs to be done to provide the police with the necessary training?

Dr Cameron: I agree. Our police are on the frontline and they deserve the utmost respect for the work they do, but yes, it is correct to say that they require further
training and also further support. There requires to be a clearer pathway when people exhibit challenging behaviours in the community, from the point at which the police are put into contact with them right through to the provision of adequate support in the health system, without their being caught up in the criminal justice system in between.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): The hon. Lady will be aware that the societal body that is most likely to come into contact with someone who is likely to take their own life is the police. The police, and particularly the British Transport police, are doing critical work in assessing how staff can be trained to identify potential suicides and to take action to take people back at a time of crisis in their life in order to prevent them from taking forward a suicide. We should not knock the police too much. They are doing fantastic work in this area.

Dr Cameron: I wholeheartedly agree. As I said, the police are on the frontline. They face the crux of the matter when it comes to matters of life or death. They are doing their very best with the training and resources that they have, but there requires to be a clearer pathway so that people who are at that crisis stage can access health services—and probably crisis health services—and so that the police have somewhere to ensure that the clinical needs of those people are met. It is unfair for our police to have to take care of people’s clinical needs when that is not what their training provides for.

In 2016, an academic study in Sweden, which was published in the British Journal of Psychiatry, found that people with autistic spectrum disorder were nine times more likely to die by suicide than the rest of the population. The latest research indicates that people with autistic spectrum disorder account for a harrowing proportion of suicides in the UK. There is a 16-year gap in life expectancy between people with autistic spectrum disorder and the general population. To put it all very bluntly, people with autistic spectrum disorder are 28 times more likely to die by suicide than someone who is not of that diagnosis. The statistics make one thing abundantly clear: what we are doing now to support people with autistic spectrum disorder is not working and is not enough. Research shows that almost seven in 10 people with autistic spectrum disorder experience mental health issues, including anxiety and depression. Services must be in place to ensure that people are cared for holistically. We have to meet all their clinical needs, which may mean their autism or their learning difficulties, but they will almost certainly have mental health issues. Quite frankly, we do not have services in place today that take account of the complexity of such needs.

What types of things are going wrong for people at the frontline? It is difficult for people with autistic spectrum disorder to access mental health support through the usual routes. For most of us, that might mean going to our GP as a first point of contact for primary care for mental health problems, but a GP practice is a daunting, unfamiliar place for people with autistic spectrum disorder. One young man wrote to me and described a recent trip, saying that it was

“quite hard for me to access the GP anyway. The whole environment is difficult. It’s noisy, there’s often children, it’s very hot. There’s also a loud beep when they call the next person that I find really quite painful. When you’re feeling emotionally poorly that becomes almost impossible.”

GP surgeries make reasonable adjustments for wheelchair users every day—simple changes that make the life of the patient easier—so the same policies should be implemented for people with autistic spectrum disorder. We need training to raise GP awareness. Access needs to be easier. We need to ensure that GPs know who on their register has a diagnosis of autistic spectrum disorder.

If an autistic person bypasses the GP and goes straight to mental health services, they may face unprecedented waiting times or they may simply be refused treatment. When individuals do attend services, they may find that they are discharged without any follow-up. At the Health Committee last week, we heard how a young autistic boy was turned away by child and adolescent mental health services four times, despite feeling suicidal, because he had not yet attempted to take his own life. Things have hit crisis point, and we need to ensure that we engage in prevention. Someone attempting to take their own life should not be the point at which they receive treatment. We need early intervention to pinpoint the symptoms of difficulty and where we should be aiming the treatment.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Lady for securing this very important debate. We both sit on the Health Committee, and during the inquiry into suicide prevention we heard that the point at which someone is most likely to take their own life is, tragically, when they are discharged from in-patient care. The Committee’s recommendation was that everyone should be contacted within at least three days, and we are waiting for the Government to respond. Does she agree that everything should be done to ensure that the most vulnerable, including people with autistic spectrum disorder, should be supported in that period when they are extremely vulnerable to ensure that they do not take their own life?

Dr Cameron: I agree. That is an extremely valid point. If people arrive at A&E for crisis intervention and are admitted for a period of time, it is important that they are discharged with some follow-up. People often return to the same circumstances that led to the difficulties in the first place, and if they do not have some support to deal with those difficult circumstances, they may be in a vulnerable situation and may try to self-harm or take their own life once again.

If a person with autistic spectrum disorder feels unable to go to the GP or to reach out to services in their local community, they might try to ring a suicide helpline. However, that can be extremely difficult in itself for a person with autistic spectrum disorder who finds communication and social interaction difficult. They might be able to verbalise only some of their difficulties, and they may then find there is no follow up from that service, either. Early access points and early intervention are crucial to preventing suicide and preventing mental health problems being exacerbated. Much more has to be done at that critical early intervention stage to ensure access to services.

If a person with autistic spectrum disorder reaches a health professional, they often find that their mental health problems are overlooked or misdiagnosed, which might be because they present an extremely complex case. They might also have concomitant learning difficulties, and they might not present the symptomatology that would usually be expected for anxiety or depression per se because
Dr Cameron: Yes, that is exactly the point I am making. We are exacerbating the problem for families, and they are at grave risk of having their own mental health difficulties or separations if placed under significant stresses over a period of time. Such things can be avoided if supports are put in at an early stage, and we can address the difficulties and give them the help they need in that way.

The other case that struck me this week was that of an individual who contacted me last night to say that they hoped this debate would make a difference. They had been struggling for a long time to access services for their daughter, who had been self-harming over many years and in the past few weeks had tried to throw herself on to a dual carriageway under a number of cars. She had been feeling at crisis point—breaking point—and had been feeling isolated, having a lack of peer support and of clinical help at the time of need. This individual had been discharged from CAMHS a number of times after referral for assessment. I understand that if an individual comes to a CAMHS service and does not fit a diagnosis initially, it can be difficult to think of the types of services or follow-up they need, and they may be discharged. However, that has to be looked at, because young people in this situation have grave clinical need. They might not fit a clinical or diagnostic box, but they do have clinical needs that require following up. These young individuals are falling through the gaps, and this family was concerned that their young person would literally be falling under a car and they would be losing them for good. That just cannot be something we allow to happen in today’s society. As I say, this is a crucial issue—it will be life-saving if the Minister can show the leadership that we need today.

The five year forward view for mental health recommends that NHS England should develop a referral-to-treatment pathway for people with autistic spectrum disorder. That would be a vital step, as things are too complicated; people do not know where to access services and they do not know where to go. Even the services themselves do not know the best route forward for people after they present, so this has to be streamlined and we need to see progress in this regard.

As has been mentioned, we also need to look not only at children with autistic spectrum disorder but across the lifespan, at adults. It is very important that adults who may have autistic spectrum disorder have access to a diagnosis in the first place, and that if they present with mental health issues they are able to receive the support they need. This care pathway has to straddle the lifespan, so that none of our constituents, right across the UK, fall through these gaps.

It will be important to ensure that we undertake the GP registers, which are recommended by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, whereby individuals with autism are highlighted to GPs on these registers so that they can signpost them to correct supports. That is an extremely important issue. Last time this issue was debated, the Minister at the time said that the Government were “open” to these suggestions about the registers, and it would be important to hear an update on that today.

The Scottish Government have launched their own Scottish strategy for autism in 2011, declaring autism a “national priority”. I concur with that, as it is a national priority. This means more than simply diagnosing autism; it means that we must think about people with autistic spectrum disorder in diagnosis of autistic spectrum disorder, and what level of specialty we have in different professions. What is the workforce plan to ensure that this very great need is addressed across our society? This is so important. People with autistic spectrum disorder say they do not know where to go locally. As a member of the Select Committee on Health, I have asked services about that, and they say, “We don’t really have a map of who can diagnose and who can provide specialist intervention in a given area of NHS England.” Streamlined services would make it so much easier for people to gain that initial access.

I do not want to take up the whole debate, so I will provide a brief overview before letting others speak. Many Members want to contribute to this important debate, but I wish to touch on a few other important issues.

I request that the Minister look at what mental health therapies work specifically for people with autistic spectrum disorder who have concomitant mental health difficulties. There is no adequate research base yet, but we know it is critical—it is lifesaving—so we need to prioritise funding. Traditional mental health therapies might not work in the same way for people with autistic spectrum disorder. If one of us presented at a GP surgery, we might be offered cognitive behavioural therapy, but we do not know whether that is the best option for a person with autistic spectrum disorder, or whether some kind of adapted therapy would be more appropriate. That important work should be undertaken, and undertaken quickly, to engage people in appropriate therapies and save lives.

I have been contacted by a couple of individuals whose poignant accounts have struck me. One is an individual from my constituency who says that she has continually tried to access CAMHS for her daughter, who has been repeatedly self-harming. It has placed the family in such a stressful situation over a lengthy period of time this issue was debated, the Minister at the time said that the Government were “open” to these suggestions about the registers, and it would be important to hear an update on that today.

The Scottish Government have launched their own Scottish strategy for autism in 2011, declaring autism a “national priority”. I concur with that, as it is a national priority. This means more than simply diagnosing autism; it means that we must think about people with autistic spectrum disorder.
spectrum disorder right across our communities, and about their access to services, to community services and to shopping centres—their access to society at large. This is bigger than just health, so I would like to know how the Minister is going to liaise with other Departments to make sure that we do not leave people with autism behind and to ensure that that message is embedded in all Government policy.

I have written to the Scottish Government to ask for an update, because I have read their policy thoroughly and it is extremely good, but constituents still contact me to say that, with respect to the implementation on the ground, they are having the same difficulties accessing services and that things are not working as they should. Perhaps the Scottish, Welsh and UK Governments can work together to ensure that best practice is in place for people with autism right across the United Kingdom.

I really hope that the Minister will listen to at least some of the recommendations raised in this debate. Other Members from all parties will have extremely important accounts to give. I welcome all the accounts given and interventions made. This is a vital issue of concern, so it is important that we work together, across party lines, to ensure that people with autistic spectrum disorder and mental health problems do not fall through the gaps but have the services they deserve.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. As the House knows, we have limited time this afternoon, so we have to start with a time limit of seven minutes for Back-Bench speeches.

3.55 pm

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): It is a pleasure and honour to speak in this debate, secured by the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), because it is such an important issue. It is critical to make sure that those on the autistic spectrum are absolutely wrapped up in our mental health and medical services so that we no longer need even to raise this issue in the House. To that effect, the Government have put mental health on the political agenda as no Government have before. We have invested more in mental health than any previous Government, hired tens of thousands of staff and, most importantly, enshrined the parity of esteem of mental and physical health into law. The Prime Minister took a big step forward last month by opening a review of the Mental Health Act 1983, because too many people are still suffering discrimination.

Luciana Berger: I do not seek to be partisan in these sorts of debates, but it is important to note for the record that the amendment to introduce parity of esteem for mental health into the Health and Social Care Act 2012 was tabled by Labour peers in the House of Lords, and unfortunately Tory peers voted against it. I would not like the Government to seek to claim credit for the fact that parity of esteem is now enshrined in law.

Mrs Trevelyan: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments.

Despite the cross-party efforts of all those for whom this is a passionate policy area—for 18 years I have cared for my son, who is now a young adult with autism—there are some people who are having a miserable time in the mental health system and are not yet benefiting from improved access to core therapies and services: men and women throughout the country on the autistic spectrum. We must do better.

Across the board, a quarter of us will experience mental ill health during our lives, but within the autism community that rises to eight in 10—of those diagnosed as autistic, eight in 10 suffer from mental ill health. To those of us familiar with autism, that is sadly not a surprise. Society is designed for us neuro-typicals, as my son likes to call me—I am not sure it is meant as a compliment—so almost everything designed for us can cause stress or worry for those who are wired differently.

A different perspective on the world has huge potential benefits for our society and economy, and we fail all those on the autistic spectrum to the detriment of not only the individual but society more widely.

We are failing these individuals. When I did some research for this debate—as I always do, if I can, for anything relating to this subject—I was appalled to discover the scale of suicide across the autism community. Autistica, the UK’s autism research charity, revealed international findings that autistic people without a learning disability are nine times more likely to die by suicide than the rest of the population. The charity’s research is now beginning to uncover almost identical rates in the UK as it starts to build the research database. As a parent, that is just awful to hear; but as an MP, it is a rallying cry. The exact causes are still being researched. We live in a complex environment and people are complex anyway. If we stick them in an environment that is often alien, it is not surprising that it is sometimes too hard to cope.

There are three clear ways in which our mental health services are letting our autistic citizens down now, and we have a duty to address them. First, we know that autistic people’s mental health problems are often misdiagnosed or missed completely. Despite mental health problems being the norm, there are no systematic mental health checks for autistic people. These problems can often present very differently, partly because so many become practised at masking their feelings to fit in. If someone is severely autistic, it is perhaps almost easier to identify them as sufferers, but those who are managing to live in a mainstream environment have learned some extraordinarily clever, adaptable ways to cope with our neuro-typical world and to their own very severe mental ill health. What is truly traumatic for one autistic person might not be for another, so when they do seek help, as the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow highlighted, autistic people can often find that their worries are dismissed out of hand. They are missed or misunderstood.

The NHS Five Year Forward View for mental health recommends the development of autistic-specific care pathways for mental ill health. That work, as I understand it, is supposed to begin in 2018, but we have heard nothing about it since February. Perhaps the Minister will be kind enough to update us on the project: is it still taking place; who is leading it; what is its scope; and how will autistic people be involved in helping to design it to make sure that we are not missing some very obvious things? Those things might not necessarily be obvious to those of us who are neuro-typical, but we must think in the different way that our wonderful
autistic community so often does. This is a crucial opportunity to begin transforming care for autistic people, but we must get it right.

Secondly, we know that autistic people can struggle to find the support that works for them. It is assumed that what works for us neuro-typicals will also work for them. Autistic people may benefit from cognitive behavioural therapy but, as the hon. Lady who is an expert in providing such support says, being made to group work with strangers can be entirely counter-productive. We need to think about how we can adjust that support. The idea that someone who has issues with understanding, with being able to read faces, with processing information would in any way feel supported when they are in a state of deep stress shows a complete gap in understanding. The stresses and the symptomatic problems of people with autism make it more difficult for them to cope.

**Dr Cameron:** The hon. Lady is making an extremely powerful speech, as she is speaking from very personal experience, which is extremely valuable in this Chamber. I have also heard some disturbing accounts in the past few weeks of people with autistic spectrum disorder being referred to group-based therapies, which also shows a lack of awareness of symptoms, as they have issues with being able to interact socially and to communicate. That would place an individual with autistic spectrum disorder under even greater stress than if they underwent a different form of therapy.

**Mrs Trevelyan:** I absolutely agree. I work closely in my constituency with the families who are supporting their autistic children. Clearly, dealing with strangers, with the unfamiliar, and with group dynamics is possibly one of the most difficult things to ask an autistic young person—or indeed an older person—to take on.

We have for too long neglected the research into mental health therapies for our autistic community, even though that tops the list of research priorities if we ask those in that sector. I very much hope that the Government will look to support those who are doing this work. In our manifesto, we said that we will address the need for better treatments across the whole spectrum of mental health conditions—by—“making the UK the leading research and technology economy in the world for mental health, bringing together public, private and charitable investment.”

I support those words wholeheartedly and hope that the Minister will be encouraging and will help us to do much more.

Thirdly, let me mention NHS data gathering—this is an issue that comes up in any number of NHS-related debates, but it is critical in this one. GPs are so often the first port of call for those with mental ill health. Going to a GP can be really, really difficult for autistic people. It is an environment with unfamiliar lighting, sounds and rules that cannot be escaped. The hon. Lady’s example of a bell going off is a classic one. It is the unfamiliarity and the pitch of the unexpected sound. There is a lack of understanding by neuro-typicals about what certain pitches of sound can do to those who have hyper-sensitivities. To an autistic young boy or girl, it can be like a bomb going off. We need to consider the impact of such things on those with these heightened sensitivities, especially when they are in a strange place and already in a state of anxiety. Strip lighting in public spaces is another thing that creates enormous tension.

**Paula Sherriff:** The hon. Lady is making an incredibly powerful speech. Some supermarkets, including Sainsbury’s, do an autism hour—every month, I think—which is great, as it provides literature in store for people, and staff also gain a better understanding. If a child or young person is having a meltdown, people should not think automatically that they are naughty but consider that they might be experiencing difficulties relating to their autism.

**Mrs Trevelyan:** The hon. Lady is exactly right. I have experienced many times the meltdown of a small child in a supermarket aisle and had people either offer a word of support or—usually—criticise me for being a bad parent. The line I always used was, “You tell me when you have an autistic child and take them shopping, and I’ll tell you what the problem is”. It is very difficult to understand. We need to provide places of calm. Cinemas do it, and we can do it too. I ask that the Minister take this forward and take on the challenge of getting those quality and outcomes frameworks to work so that our GPs can provide the support that people need.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** Order. I do not criticise the hon. Lady for having taken interventions—that is the stuff of debate, and a lot of people want to intervene—but it means we now have to go down to five minutes per person.

4.6 pm  

**Thangam Debbonaire** (Bristol West) (Lab): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for bringing this debate before us and the hon. Member for East Kilbride etc. (Dr Cameron) for leading on it. I also wish to say a special thank you to Mr Speaker and Mrs Bercow, who have done so much to support autism awareness in the House and beyond, particularly through their support for the National Autistic Society.

I should make a declaration of personal interest: I have a young cousin on the autistic spectrum, and I am married to someone who runs a special educational school for people with autism. My constituency team has also prioritised making Bristol an autism-friendly city. We have made a start, but we have more to do. We have held a training event for employers on how to make reasonable adjustments in recruitment and employment practices, and have had training for my team and made some adjustments ourselves.

That matters because unemployment is unacceptably high among people with autism, which contributes to mental ill health. According to the National Autistic Society, only 16% of adults with autism are in full-time paid work, and only 32% are in some kind of paid work, compared with 47% of disabled people and 80% of non-disabled people, and we know that unemployment affects mental health and self-esteem. The Government have committed to halving this autism employment gap by the end of this Parliament. In the interests of the mental health of people on the autistic spectrum, I urge the Minister to urge her colleagues to do everything they can to meet that much-needed target.
I have heard from schools in my constituency that funding pressures are affecting their specialist provision for children with special educational needs and mental health problems. Some families have told me that they have experienced effective or partial exclusion from school because of a lack of understanding of autism or of specialist support. That in turn leads to further mental health problems and is exacerbated by a lack of autism-focused specialist mental healthcare and high demand for mental healthcare generally. They have also told me of brilliant support and help from some teachers and schools, but they have fears about staff changes and worries about funding.

I have talked to public venues about what they can do with the help of the National Autistic Society and others to make themselves more autism-friendly. It cannot be acceptable that, according to the Royal College of Psychiatrists’ briefing for this debate, autistic people are more than seven times more likely than non-autistic people to commit suicide and that so many young people on the spectrum have at least one anxiety disorder. None of us wants to accept this, and we do not have to, and there is much we can do.

As I have said, my team has made autism a priority. In association with the fantastic Bristol Autism Support service and the local branch of the National Autistic Society, we recently held what we think was the country’s first MP constituency surgery specifically for adults with autism and parents of children on the autistic spectrum. I encourage all colleagues to do likewise, and I am happy to talk to them about how we did it. It meant that adults with autism and the parents of children with autism could come and tell us about challenges they faced with simple things such as transport and public spaces, as well as housing and employment, all of which affect mental health.

I am not going to repeat things that hon. Members have already said, particularly the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Stratha ven and so on—I am so sorry, I cannot pronounce the last bit.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Lesmahagow.

Thangam Debonaire: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The hon. Lady comprehensively listed recommendations that I urge the Minister to follow. I will finish by recommending two things. First, I suggest that hon. Members who care about autism and the 1% of our population who are on the autism spectrum consider, as I have done, asking a member of staff to champion that cause. I work closely with my member of staff, Councillor Mike Davies, who is our local autism lead on the council and within my own team. He has patiently taught me a great deal about how to make Bristol a truly autism-friendly city. We have a lot more to do, but I know that, with someone like Mike, I will be able to do much more than I would otherwise have done.

Secondly, I would like us to take a leap. In the House restoration and renewal programme, we could decide to work with the National Autistic Society to make this place autism-friendly. Doing so would help not just people on the autistic spectrum, including children and their parents, but all of us. It would make the place calmer, more welcoming and truly more accessible for everyone. It would be the mother of Parliaments leading by example to the rest of the country so that we can truly make the United Kingdom autism-friendly and address the chronic levels of mental ill health and suicide risk for people on the autism spectrum. I recommend that colleagues consider the suggestions that have been made by me and my team, and by others in this House.

4.11 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debonaire). She talked of having a constituency surgery exclusive to those who are on the spectrum. I actually had that pleasure last week, although it was not something that I fixed. It was just that everyone who booked an appointment had issues and was on the spectrum. That is telling about how much pressure MPs rightly face from our constituents who have such huge challenges.

I thank the hon. Member for East Kilbride and other parts of her constituency that are harder to say for securing this debate. It is a real pleasure to have the debate, because it is timed very well, coinciding with a report that has been published by the all-party parliamentary group on autism entitled “Autism and education in England 2017”. The report is particularly relevant because, when it comes to mental health and those on the autism spectrum, I am afraid to say that much starts to go wrong in schools, which are still not equipped to deal with the many people who face complex issues that arise from autism.

It was a pleasure for me to co-chair the parliamentary inquiry that led to the report with my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield). We had three inquiries in Parliament, and we heard from young people on the spectrum, parents and educational experts about where things were not working and where they could work better. The report is a positive one that discusses what could be done better, and that is not just down to money; it is a question of sharing best practice. Unfortunately, the reality of the current situation in schools is that less than 50% of the thousands of people who responded to our request for information felt happy at school, which meant that they felt uncomfortable at school. Fewer than 50% of teachers felt that they were equipped to deal with pupils who have autism. A lot of this comes down to a lack of training that many teachers have.

It is fantastic that the Government will ensure that initial teacher training includes autism awareness, but there are many teachers—including headteachers—who have already been through teacher training and are now teaching in schools but do not have sufficient understanding of the needs of autistic children. That can go wrong for the autistic child, and indeed their parents, by leading to exclusion. Of course, exclusion then leads to isolation, and isolation leads to mental ill health and, dare I say it, suicide. That is where we can do better. Unfortunately, an autistic child at school is three times more likely to be excluded than those who are not on the spectrum.

We need more training in schools and better sharing of good practice. It should not just be the case that specialist schools have all the expertise. If 70% of all pupils who are on the spectrum are in mainstream schools, we need the specialist schools to share what they know with the mainstream schools. Only when we start to tackle that will we actually do better.
I was delighted that the Government welcomed the report. We are now very much looking for them to support the recommendations in it. It will be launched by the all-party group at the beginning of next year, and I very much hope that all right hon. and hon. Members who are here today will come along and support us.

In the time I have left, I want to touch on the many challenges faced by those who have left the school system and are now in the workplace. One of the people who came to my constituency surgery last week wanted to talk about the struggles he has connecting with his jobcentre. I have committed to go along with him, meet the new work coaches we have through the roll-out of universal credit, see the application process and see how he can follow it through.

I am particularly pleased that the Government are now looking at tailoring support for those struggling to enter the workplace, recognising that those left seeking jobs have individual needs, and are looking to ensure that individual specialists are in place in jobcentres, including those ready to help people with mental health difficulties.

I want to again ring the bell for what we can do better in schools, so that we can support them to make sure that the issue of mental health for those on the spectrum is recognised. We must also absolutely believe that we can all do better, across parties.

4.15 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): First, I thank the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron)—sorry for my pronunciation—for her thoughtful and comprehensive speech, and for setting out the difficulties that people with autism face. I am tempted to say, “What she said,” but I do not think that does justice to the situation.

I just want to touch on a few points. Earlier this year I met Autistica, a charity that does research into autism. If other hon. Members have not seen its report “Personal tragedies, public crisis”, which looks into why people with autistic spectrum disorders die early—up to 16 years early, as the hon. Lady said—I would encourage them to do so. It makes shocking reading. The key points include the point that autism in itself is not a mental health problem, but that eight out of 10 autistic people will face mental health difficulties, such as anxiety and depression. Four out of 10 children with autism have two or more mental health problems. The research also shows that suicide is a leading cause of death among people with autism. Autistic adults without a learning disability are nine times more likely than others to die by suicide, and autistic adults with a learning disability are twice as likely to be die by suicide. Those are shocking figures. Suicide is preventable, and we need to do much more to reduce those figures.

We also need to recognise some of the specific problems people face. As other Members have said, many mental health problems can look different in autistic people. We need to recognise that and make sure that the issue is addressed, and that people have the appropriate treatments and are dealt with properly.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is quoting from an excellent piece of research, but is she aware that the autism commission I chair has conducted a piece of work about the spectrum of obstacles and the difficulty that people with autism face in getting through to the right people in the health service? Those two pieces of research are so powerful.

Liz Twist: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, and I absolutely agree that the two pieces of work go together and can help us to improve services for people with autism spectrum disorders.

As others have said, it is becoming increasingly obvious that some mental health therapies are not right for people with autism and do not work in the same ways as they do for other people, and we need to do more research into those areas.

It can be difficult for autistic people to approach services for support, and we have already heard about the issues with going to a GP surgery. Autistic people and their families are also left fighting the system too often, because information is not shared.

We need to do a number of things. First, as others have said, we need to diagnose autism much earlier so that appropriate interventions may be offered to people with autism and their families. Secondly, we need to record people who have autism on GP records and collect data so that we can identify the issues and develop appropriate services. It is good that, in the Westminster Hall debate in September, the Government committed to gathering data. I hope the Minister can update us on progress on that.

Next, it would be useful to hear from the Minister what progress is being made on developing the autism care pathway proposed in the “Five Year Forward View for Mental Health”, and whether it will address suicide specifically.

There is concern that suicide prevention measures are not well designed for autistic people. I hope that the Minister will look at what needs to be done differently to reach and support autistic people in crisis.

Finally, none of the recent cross-Government suicide prevention strategies makes reference to autism. Given that we now know that the risk of suicide is so high in the autism community, and that there are very different issues to be considered, as we have heard, will the Minister commit to ensuring that the next strategy looks directly at how to help autistic people in crisis?

4.20 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I join right hon. and hon. Members in congratulating the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) on securing the debate, and thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. The hon. Lady pointed out, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist), that the percentage of people who take their own life is nine times greater among people with autism than the general population. As my hon. Friend said, autism is linked to depression and anxiety.

I welcome the debate because it is another example of this House talking about mental health. People know that I think the more we talk about it, the better the debate gets. I think people should be congratulated on that. I place on the record my thanks to the charities and the army of volunteers who work with adults and children with autism, because they are unsung heroes.
I want to raise two points. One is about waiting times; the other, which the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow raised, is about how we develop pathways. In Durham, we currently have a two-year waiting list for autism diagnosis. I have tried to get to the bottom of why that is. It is only when you meet some of the parents of the young people that you see what a tragedy it is. The pressure on those families is so great that I suspect some are developing mental health issues. I am really concerned about the lost opportunity for those children, because everyone only gets one chance at education, and there are cases where children have been out of school for nearly a year, waiting for diagnosis. I am aware, as I think we all are, of the pressures that there are on child and adolescent mental health services and social services, but we must try to streamline the pathway to early diagnosis.

The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) spoke about schools. The most appalling thing I have seen is that a school excluded a child with autism, even though he had a diagnosis, because “he was too difficult”—and clearly affecting the league tables. We should monitor that, because it is a disgrace. Thankfully, the local authority stepped in and put that right, but the pressure on that parent and the child is unacceptable.

We are talking about mental health and a Health Minister will reply to the debate, but this issue is wider than just health. We have made great strides in terms of parity of esteem, and the point that the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) made is right. We are winning that battle. Now we need to win the next battle, and that is how we hardwire mental wellbeing into public policy. That is not just health; it is education, housing, social care, local authorities—

**Liz Twist:** And employment.

**Mr Jones:** And employment, as my hon. Friend says from a sedentary position.

There is another big problem that a lot of individuals with autism encounter. They go through the school system. Education finishes and they transition into work. I know of quite a few examples of this from my constituency. A lot of these young people, who are perfectly capable of engaging in some type of employment, seem to get lost in the system. The pathway that the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow mentioned must therefore continue from diagnosis all the way through an individual’s life and involve a cross-section of services, not just health. To get that idea hard-wired into the system, the Government must make sure that, from Cabinet Committee level downwards, consideration of mental health and mental wellbeing forms part of the process of policy making in each Department. The last Labour Government did something similar with veterans.

**Kevin Brennan:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, because I know that time is short. Does he agree that those Cabinet Committee-style discussions should involve ensuring that the Ministry of Justice and the Home Office understand the ways in which people with autism engage into contact with the criminal justice system and understand the behaviours—such as stimming, which is often misinterpreted and ends up with people being arrested—that those individuals exhibit?

**Mr Jones:** I totally agree, because autism is not just a health issue. The hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed made a very good point. How many times have we seen people reacting to a child in a supermarket kicking off, as it were, with no recognition of the fact that the child is on the autism spectrum or of the challenges that that poses for the parents? We need to hardwire that idea in.

The Government also need to look at health funding. I accept that they have committed to more funding for mental health, but the system that was set up in the Health and Social Care Act 2012—I hate to come back to it—makes it more difficult for the money that goes in at the top to get to where it is needed on the ground. If I were a Health Minister, I would be completely frustrated by the fact that I was pushing a lever that was not connected to anything. Clinical commissioning groups and others are taking money that should be going to mental health and diverting it towards other priorities, which I accept they see as important.

I finish by again congratulating the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow and everyone who has spoken. The debate has allowed us to shine a spotlight on mental health again—that is a good thing—on autism, which is not widely understood in the broader community, and on the particular challenges faced by those on the autism spectrum who suffer from mental illness.

4.27 pm

**Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I add my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron). I think I am the first person to pronounce the name of her constituency correctly. I am pleased once again to participate in a debate about autism, a condition that, as we all know, for too many years has not been sufficiently recognised or its challenges fully appreciated. That is starting to change, which is good news for all who are living with autism and who have been either not recognised or misunderstood for too long.

Autism is not a mental health condition, but autistic people are more likely to develop mental health problems such as anxiety disorders, OCD and depression. That is for a host of reasons, such as not being supported and experiencing social isolation. Research shows that a diagnosis of autism can lead to an increased risk of mental health conditions.

Support for those living with autism is very important, as has been widely recognised in the Chamber this afternoon. Anxiety disorders are very common among those on the autism spectrum. Roughly 40% have symptoms of at least one anxiety disorder at any one time, compared with around 15% of people in the general population, and such disorders in themselves can lead to depression.

It is very worrying that young people living with autism are 28 times more likely to consider suicide than other young people are, and it also affects adults who have not been diagnosed. There is no doubt that people with the condition have an increased risk of suicide, as my hon. Friend has pointed out. That could well be because 66% of autistic people and 67% of their families have reported feeling socially isolated.

**Mrs Moon:** Does the hon. Lady recognise that another major problem for families of autistic children is that should one of their children take their own life, the
postvention support—the after-suicide support—is not there either, so the social isolation that they experienced in life continues after death and complicates families’ grief? That area must also be tackled.

Patricia Gibson: I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady’s excellent point. Should such a tragedy occur and a suicide take place, it is important that the family is supported through that as much as possible.

Some 70% of autistic people are reported to have mental health disorders, such as anxiety or depression. As we have heard, suicide is one of the leading causes of death in the autism community, and that alone tells us that this issue demands our attention. As the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) pointed out, diagnosis is important because it should be the foundation on which effective support for autistic individuals and their families is built. Similarly, a delay in diagnosis can hinder effective support and prevent intervention strategies from being put in place.

The National Autistic Society Scotland reported in 2013 that 61% of those it had surveyed said they felt relieved when they received a diagnosis, because such a diagnosis can end years of feeling misunderstood and isolated. We have talked a lot about this as a UK issue, but as a Scottish MP, I want to mention the Scottish Government’s strategy for autism. The strategy, which is based on research, is working to improve waiting times for diagnosis and assessment to create consistent service standards across Scotland, and is providing training opportunities. The entire autism spectrum needs to be addressed, as well as the whole lifespan of people living with autism in Scotland. This is the logic behind this autism strategy, so it is a very positive step.

We have heard about initiatives such as autism hours in supermarkets and special autism-friendly cinematic screenings, and these are all very important and positive steps. There is a greater awareness and understanding of autism in this country but, as we have recognised today, we still have a long way to go. I will end by saying that we often think of those with autism as finding it difficult to see the world as we see it, but the truth is that we need to see the world as they see it, because if we do so we may then be able to start to make real progress.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I call David Linden.

4.32 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. On St Andrew’s day, may I say what a pleasure it is to serve under the chairmanship of a daughter of Elderslie?

I commend my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) for securing this debate, and it is a real pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), although I am beginning to be a bit disappointed that I do not have three communities in my constituency name. I welcome the opportunity to take part in this debate, and to sum up on behalf of the Scottish National party.

Today’s debate is on a very serious and important issue. It is important to address it for a multitude of reasons, but primarily because of the prevalence of poor mental health in those living with autism. About one in four people across the UK has a mental health problem, but the figure for autistic people is almost four out of every five. As the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) mentioned, the autism research charity Autistica reports that up to two thirds of autistic adults have thought about committing suicide and, quite shockingly—this figure is utterly concerning—35% have attempted suicide. Although only about 1% of people in the UK are autistic, up to 15% of the people hospitalised after attempting suicide have a diagnosis of autism. These are very sobering statistics, which is why it is crucial that this issue is out in the open, and I am very glad that we have managed to bring this debate to the Floor of the House today.

Despite all this information, there is not much research to indicate why such a disparity exists, and I will come back to that point in a moment. That is why the research projects commissioned by Autistica—the ongoing work with the University of Nottingham on understanding suicide and autism—are to be commended. While we await the findings of this research, we must continue to do all we can.

Given that people with autism are more likely to be diagnosed with a mental health condition, early diagnosis and support are vital. Delays in diagnosis can hinder the implementation of effective support and intervention strategies. Members from other nations in the UK will no doubt know—and indeed, they have highlighted this—where such delays are, but I would like to say a few words from a Scottish perspective. I will not, however, repeat what my hon. Friends the Members for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow and for North Ayrshire and Arran have said, for reasons of time.

The Scottish Government acknowledge that there is more we can do to improve waiting times, which is part of the strategy that was outlined by my hon. Friend for North Ayrshire and Arran. Surveys have shown that a positive diagnostic experience is associated with lower levels of stress and more effective coping strategies. Shorter waiting times for diagnosis can not only cut down on the time during which autistic people may feel misunderstood and isolated, but allow proper support to be given, which is very important. In addition to working towards faster diagnosis, the Scottish Government are investing record sums in mental health. The hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) is no longer in her place, but I know that she has an interest in this. I commend what she has done in mental health. This financial year, investment in mental health for NHS Scotland will exceed £1 billion for the first time. This represents a huge increase on the £650 million spent in 2006-07, and it underlines the greater seriousness with which mental health in general is now being treated. I welcome that.

I am the son-in-law of someone who has recently retired from a medical practice in Stornoway. My mother-in-law would often say that about half the people who came through the door had mental health issues, but that was not necessarily how the funding had been distributed in recent years.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I praise the SNP Government for their autism strategy. I can see the benefit of it in my constituency. The only slight point I would make is the tiniest wee niggle. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the good
work that the Scottish Government have done could perhaps be more widely advertised? There is still a slight gap between the Scottish general public’s understanding of it and the work that has been done. Perhaps via advertising or some sort of media campaign, it would be good to flag that.

David Linden: I am more than happy to agree with the hon. Gentleman on that. He brings considerable experience to the House; he is a former Member of the Scottish Parliament.

The additional funding for 800 additional mental health workers in key settings such as accident and emergency departments, GP surgeries, custody suites and prisons will reach £35 million by 2022. This local provision is crucial in ensuring that those with mental health problems get the help that they need when they need it. There is still much more to do, but we are moving in the right direction and clearly taking these matters seriously.

All these figures and actions might seem like hot air, but there is an understanding in this place that they can make the difference between life and death for some people. It is crucial that we get this right and learn from past mistakes if we are to prevent what are in essence preventable deaths.

It is clear from the shocking statistic that I gave earlier—that 35% of autistic people have attempted suicide—that much more can be done. There is a big challenge here and if we cannot collectively take responsibility and see that percentage fall, we will fail all those who live with autism.

I am conscious of the time and I want to make sure that my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow has a significant amount of time to wind up, but before I conclude I pay tribute to a few of the organisations that do fantastic work in Scotland such as the Autism Network Scotland and the National Autistic Society for Scotland. At this juncture I commend Bob MacBean of the National Autistic Society, a former Labour councillor in my constituency. Scottish Autism continues to do fantastic work, not least in conferences and children’s mental health. At a much more local level, in my constituency of Glasgow East, local families engaged with PACT for Autism came to visit me at one of my recent surgeries at Parkhead library. PACT is a friendly, parent carer-led support group that provides support, information and advice to all with a focus on autism spectrum disorders. I am sure that that hon. Members will have these kinds of groups in their constituencies. They provide wonderful support at a very local level, and the impact cannot be underestimated. There is a point to be made about the funding for such groups, which is probably a subject for another day.

Something as simple as one of PACT’s regular coffee mornings can be a lifeline for individuals and families in the east end of Glasgow. I commend that and I hope that the House will join me in recognising their work. We realise that such groups do an awful lot to help autistic people and their families to lead happy, healthy lives every single day.

I commend my hon. Friend, but we need to resolve in this place to do everything to ensure that people on the autistic spectrum can lead healthy, happy lives. I wish everyone a happy St Andrew’s day.
generally for children’s wellbeing, but for those living with autism it is particularly so, for a number of reasons. Experiences of suicide are different in the autism community from those in the wider population; relying on certain behaviours and expectations of what someone in need of support will look like can be dangerous.

As the Children’s Commissioner put it, children with mental health problems will become adults with mental health problems very soon. We cannot continue to miss opportunities to intervene early. That means, sadly, that T’s experience is just one of many. The five year forward view for mental health recommended that NHS England develop autism-specific mental health care pathways, but there is currently no information on the timetable, the scope of the pathway or who will be leading the issue. The pathway should cover children, young people and adults on the autism spectrum. It should take into account the fact that mental health conditions can present themselves in different ways for people with autism and it should recognise that mental health treatment may need to be tailored for people with autism. I hope the Minister will reflect on that in her response. Will she tell the House when and how the pathways will be developed?

Early intervention and prevention should form the basis of our mental health services. However, too often specific issues make it difficult for people with autism to access that early support that is so vital. The first point of call for many people experiencing mental health problems is their GP; for many people with autism that can be difficult, as GP surgeries are often not autism-friendly. This is how one autistic adult described their experience:

“When anxiety is really bad I start to feel a panic attack at the prospect of just having to step out of my front door. So having to go to the GP is like having to climb Everest.”

It is important that GPs understand that every autistic person is different, and that each person may need some adjustments to be made before he or she can feel comfortable about attending the local GP’s surgery. For example, some autistic people may be hypersensitive to sound and light and may therefore need an appointment at a quieter time of day, while others may be hyposensitive and benefit from a more stimulating environment. GPs may also need to tailor the way in which they communicate with patients—for instance, using clear language, or finding ways of communicating with somebody who does not speak. To do that, GPs must be able to access detailed and accurate records about their patients’ needs. Currently GPs often do not record much information about their autistic patients, and may not even record that a person is autistic at all.

In August, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence recommended that GPs keep a set of local autism registers similar to those kept for people with learning disabilities, asthma and diabetes. Will the Minister tell us when she expects the NICE recommendations on autism GP registers to be adopted, and whether NHS England will work to ensure that the data gathered is used to inform better commissioning of autism and mental health services?

We have heard powerful accounts today from Members on both sides of the House about what happens when we get mental health treatment wrong. It is all too easy for people with autism to receive inappropriate mental health treatment, or to be blocked altogether from access to treatment. As the Government review the Mental Health Act 1983, it is important that they consider everything that has been raised in today’s debate and ensure that autistic people are supported. The shocking suicide statistics and testimonies from Members today show starkly how crucial it is that more is done on the issue, and the power is in the Minister’s hands. I hope that she has listened and will act.

4.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price): I have greatly enjoyed listening to the debate, because I have heard so much good common sense and so much passion and care expressed about this important issue. It has been a pleasure. I am glad that we reached it in the end, although it was slightly truncated.

I congratulate the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) on securing the debate, and I congratulate all the other Members who have participated in it. Everyone was absolutely right to say that we need to understand more about mental health, autism and suicide, and to understand more about what constitutes appropriate mental health treatment and treatment for people with autism. The existence of the suicide statistics, unpleasant as they are, demonstrates that we really must do better in this regard.

As I have said, I enjoyed all the speeches today, but I pay particular tribute to the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow for the expertise and the personal passion that characterised her arguments. She has given me a lot to think about, but let me reaffirm to her that my door is always open so that I can hear more. I particularly want to hear what the strategy in Scotland has delivered, because she is absolutely right: when we see good practice, we should all share it and ensure that it becomes the norm for everyone.

We can never debate autism without considering the issue of waiting times, and, as Members have pointed out, in some areas they are very poor indeed. As we have confirmed, we will be publishing more data from April which will provide us with the tools with which to “give challenge”. However, it is clear that waiting times are not good enough, especially in the north-east, and we are failing people when we do not give them an early diagnosis.

The hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) mentioned the criminal justice system, which is where people with autism and mental health issues often end up. As he said, we need to improve the sensitivity with which the criminal justice agencies deal with such conditions. I can tell him that the Ministry of Justice is working with the Home Office and the Crown Prosecution Service to develop new guidelines to help officers to support people. I think I need to do more with the MOJ to ensure that we do not put people in a setting that will damage them further, but I am pleased that there are now liaison and diversion services covering 80% of the country to achieve exactly that.

The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow also described very well, as did the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), how for some people with autism
accessing support from GPs can cause distress in itself. This is where debates such as this can be so useful, because sometimes the most simple, practical things can make the biggest impact. It surely cannot be beyond the wit of any of us to make sure that GPs receive appropriate advice about things like lighting, and even having a quiet area. We often now have multi-service GP and health centres, and there must be space in them to have a quiet area.

Mrs Moon: One of the risks is that, rather than going to their GP, people will look online in the internet, where, sadly, they will find far too much information about how to take their own life and what methods to use. Also, if they go into chatrooms to share, they find encouragement to take their own life. This is an area that we must tackle.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention and the work she does in this area; I know she cares about it a great deal. She is absolutely right that there is a serious vulnerability among people who feel uncomfortable about accessing medical care. We must consider the proximity of the internet where it is possible to buy drugs and where nobody really understands what they are buying. We can do a lot more to enable people to protect themselves. The internet is a great source of information, but it can be less than benign when people want to use it for these purposes.

I have limited time and know I will not be able to do justice to all the contributions to the debate, but I will do my best. If I do not cover them all, it is not because I have ignored any of the points raised; rather, it is because there were too many good speeches to address in a short space of time.

The hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) made some extremely good points. She rightly highlighted the issue of unemployment, and I, too, am particularly concerned about that. We have just published the work and health strategy, and this is an area where we need to do better. The reality is that there is a great skillset here for particular disciplines, and enlightened employers recognise that. We can do a lot more to spread good practice here, as with GP surgeries, such as about what would be sympathetic interview styles for people with autism, so that we can enable them to become integrated. The hon. Lady is right that work is probably the best tool with which to protect our mental health, and we will look at that.

I was also intrigued by the hon. Lady’s autism surgeries, and wonder whether she might consider making that a toolkit that all of us with an interest in the issue could roll out in our own surgeries. Again, a lot of this is about raising awareness of the challenges people with autism face. We are in the public eye and have the ability to do that, so I ask the hon. Lady to tell me how she organised those surgeries.

My hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) spoke at length about her own experience and set me a number of challenges. I will be happy to report to her on them. I can also give her every guarantee that the data she asked for will be made public next year.

I shall now turn to some of the things we are doing to develop the autism pathway and autism strategy. We have set an expectation in the NHS mandate that the NHS will reduce the health gap between people with mental health problems, learning disabilities and autism and the population as a whole, and support them to live full, healthy and independent lives. We acknowledge, however, that the complexity of autism and the multifaceted nature of the needs of those on the spectrum poses particular challenges to professionals and commissioners. I am keen that mental health should be considered by the new task and finish groups that are being established to implement the autism strategy, and I will ensure that progress is made in implementing the strategy in line with the Autism Act 2009.

It is important that the NHS accommodates the requirements of vulnerable groups such as autistic people through staff training, awareness raising and reasonable adjustments to services, as we have heard. Autistic people should be able to access mental health services like everyone else if they are supported to engage with services and helped to explain their problems so that they can receive treatment. They should not fall between two stools—between autism or learning disabilities services on the one hand and mental health services on the other. We need to ensure that we are giving bespoke treatment and care to people with both issues.

A lot of the treatments that we are developing in mental health will not be suitable for people with autism. We are therefore looking at what we can do to alter the psychological therapies that are available to make them more user-friendly and sympathetic to people with autism. I was horrified to hear what was said about group therapy. I am a lay person, but it is pretty obvious to me that group therapy is not appropriate for people with autism. Clearly, the fact that that is happening is an indication of how much more we have to do to ensure that society is more sensitive to the needs of those people.

I am running out of time, and I really want to hear from the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow, but I just want to emphasise that research will play an important role. We are looking at many projects at the moment. There is a research theme on neurodevelopmental disorders, and a project at Avon and Wiltshire Mental Health Partnership NHS Trust looking into guided self-help for depression in adults with autism, as well as work at Leeds and York Partnership NHS Foundation Trust. In the East of England, a project is being led by Professor Simon Baron Cohen focusing on suicide, autism and autistic traits, which will obviously be of interest to everyone who has participated in the debate today. I am grateful, too, for the research undertaken by Autistica, which has really highlighted this issue and brought us to where we are today. I am pleased to say that Autistica has met the national suicide prevention strategy advisory group, which advises the Government on the national suicide prevention strategy, to talk about its research. We will be reflecting on the advice that it has given us.
I thank everyone once again for participating in the debate. As I have said, I am always interested to hear about good practice and what more we can do. Rest assured, we still need to do much more to support people with autism, and particularly to ensure that they can access appropriate mental health services.

Dr Cameron: This has been a wonderful debate. It has been truly cross-party and collegiate, and we must work together to improve the lives of people across the autistic spectrum and the services that we provide for them. This is about lifespan, so it involves a number of services for all aspects of the lifespan. It is also about streamlining the transfer from child to adult services. This is a multi-departmental matter, and I urge the Minister to speak to other Departments to ensure that the autism strategy is embedded in all their policies. As has been said, we need more early diagnosis, awareness and support in schools, and treatments that can be adapted. There is also vital research to be done, and we could be world leaders in that regard. That is a key aspiration that we should work to meet. People with autism need support from school to the workplace, and carers and families also need support. We also desperately need to provide crisis services. Parliament must be inclusive, and I am keen to hear more about what we can do as individual MPs, both in our surgeries and through Parliament, to take these issues forward. We need to make our surgeries autism-friendly places, to ensure that we are role models in service development.

The Minister has many issues to take forward, and I am thankful for her response. I am glad that her door is open, because I might be coming through it on numerous occasions. I am also keen to visit the projects that she has described, which are going to pave the way for progress. It is vital that we take this forward and save lives. Let us work together and do this right across the United Kingdom. Finally, I would like to wish everyone a happy St Andrew’s day.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Happy St Andrew’s day.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I want to raise with you a conversation that I have had in the past few minutes, in which I have been informed that Royal Bank of Scotland is going to close three branches in my constituency, at Kyle of Lochalsh, Beauly and Mallaig. I am asking for your assistance, Madam Deputy Speaker. What do I need to do in order to ask one of the Treasury Ministers to come to the House to discuss this important matter? We understand that Royal Bank of Scotland is operationally independent, but none the less, we as the state are the majority owners of the bank. The bank in Kyle is one hour’s travelling distance to the nearest Royal Bank of Scotland branch in Portree. The one in Mallaig is an hour’s distance to Fort William. Those banks have thousands of customers. The branch in Beauly is the last remaining bank in that village. We need to have an urgent debate in the House about the responsibility that banks such as Royal Bank of Scotland have to their communities.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his point, but he knows that it is not a point of order for the Chair and I cannot give an answer on the substantive issue that he has raised. He seeks my advice, however, on how to bring a Minister to the Dispatch Box, and I can advise him that there are various methods that he can use to do that. He might like to consult the Table Office on the best way forward. I am sure that he will also consider other ways, such as approaching the Backbench Business Committee in order to arrange a debate, if he is so inclined. If he is certain that this is a matter that ought to be discussed on the Floor of the House, I am sure that his ingenuity will ensure that that happens.
Leaving the EU: Student Exchanges

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Mike Freer.)

5.1 pm

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise the subject of foreign exchanges in the Chamber this evening. In my own family, exchanges are an integral part of growing up. I was packed off to Holland at 10 years old, and to a family in France at 11. As my linguistic skills improved, Germany and Hong Kong followed. During my undergraduate studies, I was lucky enough to go on an Erasmus programme at Caen University.

The pattern repeats itself, as in so much of what we do as parents: at home we rarely have a holiday without a foreign exchange student. In the past few years we have welcomed Anne-France and Philippe from Paris; Anya from Moscow; Yining Le from Beijing; Julius and Johanna from Düsseldorf, whose mother was an old friend of mine from university; Eleanor from Loches; and we are just starting to get to know a girl from southern Italy. With two linguist daughters, a great deal of our family time is spent applying for visas for my girls, and entertaining and providing regular meals for visiting teenagers. The experience is not simply about improving the ability to communicate in a different language: the children come back confident and buzzing with new experiences, as well as with a desire to learn better language skills. We have all learnt from Anya and Yining Le, who taught us so much about their different cultures and traditions. We really value the wider network of family and friends we have made as a result of getting to know them.

The same was true for year 6 pupils at Hook Norton Primary School, whom I was proud to see win a British Council international school award earlier this week. Their teacher told me about 18 years of exchanges with Sweden and how much the children gain from it. Bure Park Primary School, which I also visited this week, exchanges annually with Italian and German children. I want such opportunities to be available to all our young people.

We must give greater consideration to language learning. The Government have been laudably keen to promote STEM subjects—science, technology, engineering and maths—and are making efforts to ensure that modern foreign languages are part of the EBacc. Nevertheless, language learning is on a downward spiral. The number of GCSEs taken in modern languages fell by more than 7% this year, and this summer’s A-level results show of GCSEs taken in modern languages fell by more than 10% over the past four years. Those figures show why we want such opportunities to be available to all our young people.

Another great advantage of student exchanges is that they are a comparatively cheap way to travel. The cost is that of the fare and, where appropriate, the visa. It is important that the Government think seriously about how they deal with young people on exchanges, because when my daughter visits her Russian exchange, she has to fill out a new visa application each time and come up to London to have her biometrics taken. We put up barriers on both sides, because her 17-year-old Russian exchange was charged almost £500 for her UK visa application, which had to be expedited as her initial application was refused—all this to allow her to come on our family holiday to Wales. Although I realise this goes beyond the Minister’s remit, I hope he will work with his colleagues in the Home Office to ensure that teenagers such as those two, as well as the young people who take part in programmes such as Erasmus, are encouraged in their exchanging, particularly after we leave the EU.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. Another dimension, as I am sure she knows, is that schools often go on visits abroad—not necessarily exchanges, but it is worth it. I thank all teachers who put themselves out and often spend their own holidays travelling with groups of teenagers—not everybody’s cup of tea—to far-flung places to enable deep, worthwhile experiences for our children. I hope the Minister will join me in encouraging that.

Victoria Prentis: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. The type of foreign language exchanges I am talking about involve living with a family abroad and the depth of understanding that can be gained only in a domestic setting. That is what I am so keen to promote. Of course it is difficult for schools to arrange such exchanges, but it is worth it.

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Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): This is a classic example of a debate in which I made to leave Chamber, realised what the debate was about and came back with alacrity. I am hugely enjoying the hon. Lady’s contribution, and I am in total agreement.

Victoria Prentis: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. The type of foreign language exchanges I am talking about involve living with a family abroad and the depth of understanding that can be gained only in a domestic setting. That is what I am so keen to promote. Of course it is difficult for schools to arrange such exchanges, but it is worth it.

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with her. Friendships formed between foreign students can be crucial. President Clinton was a Rhodes scholar at Oxford, which helped his understanding and attitude towards this country.

Victoria Prentis: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. It is about a depth of friendship that encourages not only language skills but the ability to have a network of friends and contacts. My early experiences of foreign exchanges gave me the confidence to travel abroad in the political sphere. I was able to spend some time working for the Christian Democratic Union of Germany and at the White House in the States, but I doubt that I would ever have thought of such opportunities had I not had my early experiences of travel and of the value of building networks across continents, which early foreign exchange travel offers to students. I cannot tell him how valuable I think such experiences are.

Exchanges can give our young people the internationalist outlook that we need. We should capitalise on the teenage ability to make friends easily and encourage teenagers to open their eyes to new and different opportunities. Even though learning a language inevitably involves hard work on grammar and vocab tests, the speed with which one picks up a language when immersed in family life is second to none. Learning with a friend is so much better, and the technology available to students makes learning easily accessible. My children have Mandarin and Russian keyboards on their phones to enable them to text their exchanges—that does make policing their phones rather difficult when their mother does not speak either language. Nevertheless, I commend their enthusiasm, and it seems to be the way that the children of today find easiest to communicate. I am impressed that one of my daughters does her texting in Russian and the Russian exchange does hers in English, which is really commendable—and not just done to frustrate mothers.

Finally, language learning has lifelong health benefits. Studies of people with Alzheimer’s disease have shown that, on average, symptoms started four and half years later for people who could speak at least two languages. It is perhaps appropriate to mention my grandmother here. She is well into her 90s, but continues to work on her language through audiobooks now that her eyesight is not as good as it once was. She successfully taught generations of children of all abilities to communicate in a selection of languages—albeit all with a strong Welsh accent. I ask the Minister to join me in thanking her and today’s generation of language teachers, including the inspirational women who teach my daughters. I ask him to encourage them to promote the student exchanges that we need to take global Britain forward.

5.12 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) on securing this debate. I was at school this morning with a commendable group of language teachers, who do wonderful work in that school.

This debate gives me the opportunity to emphasise again the Government’s commitment to remaining open to the world after we leave the EU and to becoming even more global and internationalist in our outlook. Improving the take-up and teaching of modern foreign languages in our schools and ensuring that there continues to be international opportunities for students, young people and teachers to participate in exchanges is an important part of achieving that goal. I also agree with my hon. Friend that there are business, cultural and educational benefits to learning a language.

The level of take-up and proficiency in foreign languages in England is not yet what it should be—my hon. Friend was right to point that out—and we have taken steps to address that. In 2010, we introduced the English baccalaureate. To meet this measure of performance for state-funded secondary schools, pupils have to be entered for GCSEs in English, maths, science, history or geography and an ancient or modern foreign language. In July, we announced our ambition for 75% of year 10 pupils to be taking the EBacc by 2022 and for that to reach 90% by 2025. It was 37% this year. That represents a significant step-change for schools, particularly in relation to the uptake of languages GCSEs, which is often the area that has prevented schools from achieving higher EBacc entry rates. Our expectation is that the uptake of these GCSEs will increase over the coming years, widening the potential pool of students with the ability to continue studying languages to a higher level.

In September 2014, schools began to teach the new national curriculum that we introduced. It requires local authority-maintained primary schools to teach a modern or ancient foreign language to pupils at key stage 2. Schools can choose which language to teach, and must ensure that pupils make substantial progress in one language by the end of primary school. It is also mandatory for maintained secondary schools to teach a foreign language to pupils at key stage 3. Although there is no requirement for every pupil in such schools to then take a language at GCSE, there is a statutory entitlement for every pupil to take a course leading to a recognised qualification, if they wish to do so.

The fact that pupils often have the choice of whether to continue to study a language to GCSE makes it especially important for their earlier experiences of being taught the subject to be positive.

Mr Jim Cunningham: The Minister may or may not be able to answer this question. How popular is Chinese—how interested are people in this country in taking up the language? The Chinese have lots of markets and we should not forget that we trade with China.

Nick Gibb: If the hon. Gentleman is patient, I shall come to that. One of the purposes of my visit this morning was to see the Mandarin excellence programme that is happening in a number of schools throughout the country.

In a 2015 report, “Key stage 3: the wasted years?”, Ofsted reported that many pupils chose to discontinue studying languages at the end of key stage 3 because of a lack of enjoyment in their lessons or a feeling of not making enough progress. That was despite many of the same pupils recognising the value of languages. Prompted by that, the Teaching Schools Council carried out a review of modern foreign languages pedagogy in key stages 3 and 4. The review was carried out by the experienced headteacher Ian Bauckham and reported in November last year. It set out key principles for
delivering effective language teaching and produced a number of sensible recommendations for teachers and headteachers in schools.

We have improved the standard and quality of qualifications. We worked with Ofqual, subject experts, universities and teachers to design new GCSEs and A-levels, which were introduced for French, German and Spanish in 2016. The level of demand of these qualifications matches those of the highest-performing countries, and they will better prepare pupils for the demands of further education and employment. They are robust qualifications in which students, employers, colleges and universities can have confidence. French, German and Spanish remain the top three most popular foreign languages taught in our schools, although Mandarin is coming up fast. As the British Council “Languages for the Future” report highlights, Mandarin is one of the top five languages of crucial importance for the UK’s future prosperity, security and influence in the world.

My hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) might be interested to know that the Department has established and funded the Mandarin excellence programme since 2016. The programme offers intense study in the language, which is not only personally enriching for students but will give them a significant advantage when they enter the world of work. We want 5,000 young people, ab initio, to study the language and become fluent by 2020.

Pupils on the programme study Mandarin—listen to this—for eight hours a week, at least four hours of which are teacher-led in classrooms, with the remaining four hours in their own time. Over the next four years, I hope that we will see a significant increase in the number of pupils on the programme. The programme started with 14 secondary schools in September 2016, and 23 additional secondary schools joined in September this year.

I was delighted earlier today to see the programme in action and meet some of the pupils during my visit to Alexandra Park School in Haringey. At Alexandra Park, 27 pupils started in the year 7 cohort in September last year. They scored a very impressive 95% average mark in progress tests across reading, writing, listening and speaking last summer, and have all progressed to the second year of the programme. A new year 7 cohort of 30 pupils started Mandarin lessons at Alexandra Park in September 2017, and I am sure they will do equally well. Incidentally, all year 7 pupils at that school study Mandarin and a European language.

**Mr Jim Cunningham:** Once again, I am not sure whether the Minister can answer this question now. Perhaps he can write to me on it. Are any schools in Coventry teaching Mandarin?

**Nick Gibb:** I will have to write to the hon. Gentleman about that. We want to have a spread of Mandarin excellence programmes across the country, but the initial schools were chosen because they already had a track record of teaching Mandarin very well. The project is led and driven by the excellent Katharine Carruthers of the UCL Institute of Education. The pupils I met this morning were hugely impressive, very ambitious and had high expectations. They want not only to take a GCSE and an A-level in Mandarin, but to go on to HSK 4 and HSK 5, which is essentially fluency in the language. Interestingly, I asked them all what they wanted to do when they left school and none of them wanted to go on to study Mandarin at university. They wanted to be lawyers, doctors and business people, but they also wanted to be fluent in Mandarin.

**Jamie Stone:** The answer to my question may be, “Write a letter to John Swinney in the Scottish Government” but does the Minister have any idea what the situation is with regard to the teaching of Mandarin across the border in Scotland?

**Nick Gibb:** No, I am afraid that I do not. This is a devolved matter. I have spoken to John Swinney a number of times about education matters, and the Scottish Government are implementing a new curriculum for excellence.

The programme also supports the training of new Mandarin teachers to ensure that there is capacity within the system to teach Mandarin. The quality and supply of teachers of modern foreign languages are essential to pupil proficiency and progress. It is very important that pupils are taught by high-quality and inspiring teachers—like the ones I met this morning—in all the subjects, including languages. We remain committed to attracting the brightest and best graduates into the teaching profession. To support that commitment, we continue to offer generous tax-free bursaries, worth up to £26,000, and tax-free scholarships of up to £28,000 for trainees in modern foreign languages.

Figures released today show that we recruited 1,405 modern foreign language trainees to start initial teacher training courses this year, achieving 93% of our target, which was similar to our performance last year, where we achieved 94% of our target.

**Mr Paul Sweeney** (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I appreciate the Minister giving way on this important subject. Is he aware of the ScotGrad programme in Scotland, which is run by Scottish Enterprise? It sponsors up to 40% of the gross salary of an undergraduate for a year so they may undertake a placement in industry on the subject of business development. Let me cite a good example. When I worked with Scottish Enterprise, I sponsored a foreign language student, a Mandarin student, who worked with a heavy engineering company in Scotland. As a result of that one-year placement, the company increased its turnover in the Chinese market by up to 60% in the given year. That was a huge commercial opportunity, and just shows the untapped potential of integrating foreign language skills into our industries. There could be a great opportunity to roll that out across the United Kingdom.

**Nick Gibb:** The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. We are a global trading nation and it is essential that we are able to speak to our customers in their own language, which is why I feel as passionately as my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury and the hon. Gentleman about the importance of young people learning languages.

We recognise, however, that recruitment in modern foreign language subjects continues to be challenging, which is why we are supporting schools with targeted initiatives that go beyond our standard recruitment channels. For example, we recently announced a new student loan reimbursement programme for MFL teachers in the early years of their career. This pilot incentivises
new teachers to stay in the profession and to teach in the areas where they are needed most. We also acknowledge the valuable contribution that internationally trained teachers make to education in this country, which is why we want to ensure that schools have the opportunity to recruit from overseas to fill posts that cannot be filled from the resident workforce.

We are working with the Spanish Ministry of Education and have joined its visiting teachers programme, which provides opportunities for schools in England to recruit high-quality modern foreign language teachers from Spain. An acclimatisation package is provided to help to support the new teachers to work and live in England. Sixteen teachers took up post in September 2017, and we have built a recruitment pool of over 60 teachers available for recruitment this academic year. We also recognise the benefits that cultural exchange can bring. My hon. Friend is absolutely right about that. They build important political, diplomatic and knowledge-sharing networks around the world, not to mention the lifelong friendships that come from those exchanges.

Since 2007, the UK Government have co-funded an annual headteachers’ exchange programme with the Ministry of Education in Singapore and the British Council, and I was delighted to attend the 10th anniversary of the programme at the Singapore high commission last week. This scheme provides an excellent opportunity for headteachers in England to share ideas and best practice with their counterparts in Singapore, which is the best-performing country in PISA on important areas such as improving maths teaching and the use of textbooks to support a knowledge-rich curriculum. Headteachers who have taken part in previous exchanges have reported a lasting positive impact. For example, Executive Head Marie-Claire Bretherton of Mount Street Academy, Lincoln, has now trained 60 teachers across the Kyra Teaching Schools Alliance in maths mastery following her visit to Singapore in 2016.

School links and exchanges between schools have long provided valuable cultural and language experiences for our pupils. Many of our schools have long-standing partnerships with schools overseas, and the British Council manages a number of school-linking programmes in over 40 countries and a supportive framework for international activities in schools through its international school award. Supporting student exchanges helps us to create a new generation that is globally mobile, culturally agile and thrives in an increasingly global economy.

In higher education, we are keen to work with the sector to further explore how we can best promote outward mobility and the benefits our UK students will gain from studying abroad. Earlier this month, my hon. Friend the Universities Minister welcomed the Go International: Stand Out campaign launched by Universities UK International to encourage young people to experience studying, working and volunteering abroad. This campaign aims to double the percentage of UK students having some form of outward mobility experience as part of their degree by 2020.

I cannot talk about student exchange without mentioning the long-established Erasmus+ programme. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made it clear in her Florence speech that education was one area where she hoped the UK would continue to participate on the basis of a fair and ongoing contribution, among many other areas of business, commerce and culture.

We are not just committed to providing our young people with outward mobility opportunities. We also recognise the importance of welcoming talent from around the world into our institutions. As the Government have said before, EU and international students enrich the UK, both financially and culturally, bring greater diversity to our schools, universities and colleges, add an international dimension to the experience of our students and go on to become important ambassadors for the UK in later life.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising these important issues and for allowing me to point out how much the Government value modern foreign languages, inspirational teachers and student exchanges. I hope that she is reassured that we recognise the importance of this issue and that we are working to get the right result for the education sector in the UK.

Question put and agreed to.

5.27 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Friday 1 December 2017

The House met at half-past Nine o’clock

PRAYERS

The Chairman of Ways and Means took the Chair as Deputy Speaker (Standing Order No. 3).

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I beg to move, That the House sit in private.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 163).

The House divided: Ayes 0, Noes 169.

Division No. 51] [9.34 am

AYES

Tellers for the Ayes: Lucy Allan and Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg

NOES

Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Benn, rh Hilary
Blackman, Kirsty
Blomfield, Paul
Bone, Mr Peter
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Cadbury, Ruth
Cartidge, James
Charalambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Coaker, Vernon
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Coyle, Neil
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
David, Wayne
Glindon, Mary
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Haigh, Louise
Hall, Luke
Hamilton, Fabian
Hancock, rh Matt
Hardy, Emma
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harris, Carolyn
Harris, Rebecca
Healey, rh John
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Hendrick, Mr Mark
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Howarth, rh Mr George
Hug, Dr Rupa
Hurd, Mr Nick
Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Dan
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Mr Marcus
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Khan, Afzal
Kilren, Gerard
Kinnock, Stephen
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, rh Brandon
Linden, David
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Maskell, Rachael
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
Mearns, Ian
Merriman, Huw
Morden, Jessica
Morris, Grahame
Morton, Wendy
Murray, Ian
Norris, Alex
Onn, Melanie
Peacock, Stephanie
Pennycook, Matthew
Perry, Claire
Philp, Chris
Piddock, Laura
Pincher, Christopher
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Prentis, Victoria
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reeves, Ellie
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Shah, Naz
Skidmore, Chris
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Cat
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Laura
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Spellar, rh John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Rory
Streeting, Wes
Sunak, Rishi
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Walker, Thelma
Western, Matt
Whitfield, Martin
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes: Nick Smith and Mr Alan Campbell

Question accordingly negatived.
Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill

Second Reading

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): For the benefit of the House, let me say that a point of order was raised yesterday regarding the publication of the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill, and I think it might be helpful to make a short statement on the matter.

The Bill was initially made available in hard copy and online on Wednesday 29 November. An error was identified on Thursday morning and was brought to the attention of the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), who immediately informed the Public Bill Office. The error identified was not in any way the fault of the hon. Gentleman; it was an error made during the manual inputting of the text into the Bill publishing software. The Public Bill Office is taking steps to improve this process to ensure that such a mistake is not repeated with future Bills.

The corrected version of the Bill was available online within 30 minutes of the error being reported, and hard copies were made available in the Vote Office within one hour, 10 minutes and five seconds. I am satisfied that there was no infringement of the notice requirements for the Bill and, just as importantly, that the error does not affect the debate that will take place on it, so I will not entertain any further points of order on this subject.

9.46 am

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for providing that clarification.

I am new to Parliament, but I have been in politics for decades, and in that time, I have seen trust in our political system erode. Today, only 20% of the UK trusts politicians at least to some degree. The public already see politicians as remote, self-interested and unaccountable, and the current boundary changes would make that worse. The Bill would preserve the MP-constituency link, the power to scrutinise the Executive and the strength of our communities. It would harness engagement in recent elections to reverse, rather than reinforce, the trend towards disillusionment.

This is a debate about our democracy. I stand to gain no advantage from the change I am proposing because, under the current review, my constituency would stay exactly the same. I am here to speak for the good of Parliament, not my own. I will briefly set out the five key arguments for my Bill, as I am keen to allow time for other contributions.

First, the public see politicians as remote. The boundary changes would take MPs even further away from their constituents. I am fortunate in that I can get from one end of Manchester, Gorton to the other in half an hour, but many colleagues come from rural constituencies that are already a challenge to represent. As we reduce the number of MPs, these constituencies will get bigger. Let us take the example of North Lancashire, which would stretch from the edge of the Lake district to the outskirts of Blackpool and Preston, covering more than half the county.

Practically the only argument that the Government used in favour of reducing the number of MPs was that it would save money—apparently about £13 million. That falls apart when we consider that the previous two Prime Ministers appointed 260 life peers between them, at a cost of £34 million a year. Why increase the size of the unelected House of Lords if we are really trying to cut the cost of politics?

There are other ways to save money. Not embarking on five-yearly boundary reviews, which each cost about £10 million, would be a start. Gradually reducing the number of MPs could be another, but a drastic and sudden reduction in the number of MPs causes much more disruption, and costs more than is necessary. Clearly cost was not the real motivation; the change was an attempt to gain a political advantage.

Secondly, we cannot reduce the number of MPs without reducing the size of the Executive. With the same proportion of MPs as we have now, 48% of Conservative Members would be on the payroll. The job of Back Benchers in all parties is to scrutinise legislation and hold the Government to account. Reducing the number of MPs would tip the balance of power towards the Executive. The charge that politicians are unaccountable would only become stronger and louder. What we would lose in independent-minded dissenters cannot be justified by modest savings.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I was the Minister who tried to bring in a Bill to ensure that the House of Lords was elected, and of course it was because the Labour party would not support the programme motion that we were not able to make any progress. On the hon. Gentleman’s point about cost, it is true that more Members have been appointed to the House of Lords but, since 2010, the cost of running the other place has actually fallen each year—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. The right hon. Gentleman is hoping to catch my eye early in the debate, so I suggest that he saves his speech. As he should know, we need short interventions—we have a long day.

Afzal Khan: I understand what the right hon. Gentleman is saying, but the bottom line is that if we are trying to reduce cost, why are the Government putting more and more unelected people into the House of Lords, and appointing more and more special advisers? It does not make sense. I would prefer to have more elected people.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend accept what the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee said in 2015: if the Government of the day got their way—this Government are trying again—it would break all locational links and completely undermine the representational basis of this House? That would be a very sad day.

Afzal Khan: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. Brexit legislation is passing through Parliament and we are undergoing one of the most significant constitutional changes in decades. We have already seen from our debates on Henry VIII provisions that Ministers will always attempt to extend their powers. At this point, we must fight to preserve our power of scrutiny.
MPs are taking on more and more work. We are about to lose 73 MEPs. MPs will have to absorb that workload and will be able to deliver less for our constituents. A reduction in the number of MPs is a threat to the power of Back Benchers, and to the accountability of Government. A healthy democracy requires us to fight for it over and over again. That is why my Bill would retain the number of MPs at 650.

Thirdly, accountability is an issue not just for the Government but for individual MPs. Holding boundary reviews every five years would make us less accountable to our constituents, as they may change at every election. The MP-constituency link is one of the best things about our democracy, and MPs have the chance to build a relationship with our communities that can span decades. We get to understand issues particular to our area, and we walk side by side with our communities as they change. How can constituents hold us to account if we are here today, gone tomorrow? My Bill would address that by retaining the tradition of holding boundary reviews every 10 years. That is regular enough to keep up with population changes, but not so regular that MPs become unaccountable to the people who elect us.

Fourthly, the starting point for constituencies should, as far as possible, be community and continuity. Clearly we need to strike a balance. On the one hand, there should be the same number of voters in each constituency so that every vote counts the same, but, on the other, constituency boundaries should be based around communities. The strict quota in the current review has produced some bizarre results. The coherence of a community, continuity with previous constituencies and respect for natural boundaries were given a lower priority than strict adherence to numbers.

That is clearly illustrated when we consider Crawley, a constituency that has remained unchanged for 20 years. It is now only 453 voters below the quota, so the new boundaries would include a ward from the other side of the motorway, in a different authority. Relaxing the quota to 7.5% would mean that the majority of constituencies would not change at each election. That would strike the right balance and mean that each boundary review was less disruptive. The Boundary Commission has supported that. Indeed, its submission to the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee’s inquiry said that that would be the main change it asked for in any future review. The commission is keen to be given powers to balance the principles of continuity, organic nature and equality.

Finally, there will always be special cases when the rules for the rest of the country cannot reasonably be applied. The law already includes provision for the Isle of Wight and some Scottish islands. As part of the Good Friday agreement, Northern Ireland has a special status in our law. I believe that that should extend to fixing its number of constituencies. My Bill would maintain the status quo by fixing the number of Northern Ireland MPs at 18 and maintaining the current representation there. Brexit has already put Northern Ireland in an uncertain position. Without clarity on the future of the border or a host of other issues, such a measure would at least be one way to prevent further uncertainty. We must do all that we can to maintain the fragile stability in Northern Ireland, which is threatened already by Brexit.

Trust in politics is eroding, but right now we have a choice. The big opportunity I see to counter the erosion of trust is in the 2 million people who registered to vote in the EU referendum and the general election. I hope that that marks a turning point, but that will happen only if we empower new voters and encourage participation. The current boundary review ignores them entirely—what a slap in the face! My Bill would include those 2 million voters in the boundary calculations and ensure that their voices were equally represented.

The question for us now is: do we capture the energy of the recent elections, include new voters, and keep the constituency link, the powers of Back Benchers and the importance of communities, or do we plough ahead with the current boundary proposals, unpopular and unrepresentative as they are? Constituency boundaries are the physical building blocks of our democracy. They should be born from the organic growth of communities, not the cold calculation of politicians.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak in this very important debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) on being the promoter of a Bill on such an important issue, and on his excellent and passionate speech setting out some of the arguments that need a light shine upon them. There is much to be commended in the Bill, which highlights some of the weaknesses in the process being undertaken by the Boundary Commission. I believe that process is flawed.

All hon. Members are clear that this is about communities, people and, in essence, democracy. I suspect we all agree on the democratic principle of equal representation and that every vote should be worth the same. I care very much about this principle; it is why I am here today. The objective should be for all constituencies to be an equal size. The second objective from both the Government and the Boundary Commission is to cut costs. Understandably, people would like to see fewer Members and far fewer Members of the other place. Parliament can be seen as an inefficient bureaucracy. The machinery can be hugely impenetrable. Not including MPs and our staff, some 2,000 people are employed by the House of Commons. It sometimes looks like a very expensive way to do democracy.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): We have a responsibility to reduce the cost of politics. If it is not in our powers to control the costs of the other place, we should still seek to reduce the cost of this place.

Lucy Allan: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I think we all agree that the cost of politics should be reduced, and there are ways in which we can do that, but as Members of this place democracy is the first principle we are duty-bound to uphold.

The proposals do not achieve the objectives that both the Government and the Boundary Commission intended to achieve through the original legislation. The hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton made a very interesting point about Crawley and I would like to speak to the Bill from the perspective of representing a new town with a rapidly growing population. What is happening in my constituency shows up the flaws in the proposals. Populations across the country will grow and shrink at
very different rates, and we have to take into account of demographics and geography. Telford is an ex-mining town with a rural hinterland. Set in the heart of rural Shropshire, it is an excellent example of a new town. Its rapid growth is very easily predicted, because we are building new homes and people are moving to Telford all the time.

One key point that I know other Members will be raising is voter exclusion. In addition to people coming to new towns with a growing population, there have been two very significant events in our recent electoral history: the EU referendum in 2016 and, although I regret to say it, young people going wild for the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) in 2017. Young people signed up to vote for the first time and people in my constituency, who had never voted and never been registered before, signed up to vote for Brexit in 2016. We cannot ignore those new voters.

Lucy Allan [Edmonton North]: The hon. Lady makes a really important point. The population of Edinburgh is exploding, but the number of constituencies is going down. That surely means that the boundary changes are making this place less representative, rather than more.

Lucy Allan: The hon. Gentleman makes a really important point.

Many Members represent constituencies with a high level of unregistered voters, but the Boundary Commission is not prepared to take them into consideration. Very often, those in most need of representation are not registered to vote. I normally have my constituency surgeries on a Friday—I feel passionately that I should be here today to represent my constituents’ interests—and my time in surgery will, very often, be devoted to those who are not registered to vote. No one is suggesting that we, as elected representatives, should ignore their voice. No one is suggesting that we should not allow them to come to our surgeries. It is a fundamental principle that they are included in the whole process. These people count, we represent them, and we have an absolute duty to make sure they are considered.

For all the consultation, no changes have been made in my constituency—or in many others—to reflect the points that have been raised. There needs to be more flexibility and discretion if the reforms are to achieve their objective. I would support the Government if their objective was to be achieved through this process. We need a process that has integrity and can be relied on to achieve what we all hope for in terms of democracy.

Ruth Cadbury: Does the hon. Lady agree that it is better to represent a larger constituency in a single unitary authority area, rather than trying to represent a smaller constituency, as set out in the Boundary Commission proposals, that straddles two borough areas with double the number of borough chief executives, clinical commissioning groups, police and—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I just suggest that, with a lot of Members wishing to speak in the debate, we have short interventions.

Lucy Allan: The hon. Lady makes a very important point. That is just one of the flaws with the current process that needs to be addressed.

As the chair of the all-party group on new towns, I want to talk about rapidly growing towns. Indeed, the process needs to recognise the changing demographics right across the country. Telford is surrounded by a band of leafy and affluent rural Conservative constituencies in rural Shropshire where the population is shrinking. They have an elderly population and young people go away to the big cities to work. We can see that those constituencies will shrink in size, whereas my constituency is growing rapidly. The Boundary Commission proposes that Telford should receive an extra 20,000 constituents of voting age, even though we are already, if we count all the voting-age population, right in the middle of the thresholds imposed by the current process. That makes a real mockery of it.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Local boundary commissions are allowed to take into account predictions of population growth and census data. Does the hon. Lady agree that it would be important to allow that for parliamentary boundary commissions?

Lucy Allan: The hon. Gentleman is right. There needs to be some discretion and flexibility to take account of local anomalies and issues, in particular those he raises.

I have a great deal of sympathy for Opposition Members, because I serve a population with pockets of significant deprivation. People come to see me when they have nowhere else to go. My weekly surgeries are full, despite best efforts to resolve problems over the phone, of people dealing with issues relating to benefits, debt and eviction. They have complex lives, tussles with the council and problems with their housing. Most are not registered to vote. The Boundary Commission, however, is not much interested in any of that—the fact that they are not registered does not count. I know that the Government and the Boundary Commission would not suggest that these people should be excluded by their representatives, so they should be included in this process.

The Boundary Commission wants to add another 20,000 people of voting age to my Telford constituency. That would make it a super-sized constituency that significantly exceeded the parameters, when all along the objective has been to create constituencies of equal size. If we will not achieve that, why is the process going ahead? Fewer people will get to see their MP. We could, perhaps, employ extra trained case workers, but that would be no different from going to the citizens advice bureau. It is not the same. The people we represent want to have a connection with us and I want to be able to deliver that form of representation.

In 1992, it was necessary to divide Milton Keynes into two constituencies. That will need to happen in Telford in the not too distant future. Instead of recognising that, however, we are adding to the number of Telford’s voters because, as of December 2015, we did not have the sufficient number of registered voters. That was an arbitrary date and a long time ago. Indeed, in electoral and political history, 2015 was a very long time ago. We have to stop and have a little look at this, so we can make a success of ensuring that all constituencies are properly represented.
Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the rapid growth of new towns makes it logical to have more regular reviews, every five years rather than every 10 years?

Lucy Allan: That is an interesting point. We are not taking into account the number of people who are coming to new towns such as my constituency, or, indeed, the number of people who will move into the houses that are being built and have almost been completed.

In my view, the so-called public consultation has been no such thing. The Boundary Commission is simply taking submissions from political parties that have gathered a great deal of local support and, in some cases, not so local support. They are lobbying for an outcome that supports the political objectives that benefit them. My constituency is a case in point. The situation is farcical: all the people who are sending submissions are politically connected, and they all want the constituency to grow significantly when it could stay as it is and be within the threshold. I cannot believe that any genuine members of the public would want to share their MP with a larger number of people.

Given that there will not be another general election until 2022, the Government have an opportunity to consider carefully whether to take this proposal off the table, go back to the drawing board and get it right for the future. Why wait until October 2018, find that the House does not want the proposals to go ahead, and then start thinking about how to correct the process? We need to update the position and redraw boundaries at some point, but we must get it right, and I think that, for all sorts of reasons, we have an opportunity to do that now.

I commend the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton, and also the former Member of Parliament for North West Durham, who presented the same Bill for the same reasons last year. There is a lack of flexibility and a failure to recognise that MPs must care for all constituents, registered or not. We must give a voice to all our constituents, be they in affluent Tory shires or urban areas.

10.11 am

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) for presenting a Bill that deals with a very important issue. I also commend the hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) for the points that she made: it is a privilege to follow her.

I stand here as the Member of Parliament for Birmingham Perry Barr. I want to iterate that because my constituency is being torn asunder by those who deem the boundary changes to be right. The constituency was created in 1950, and its first Member of Parliament was Cecil Poole, a member of the Labour party. Since then, it has had only two Conservative MPs, for a maximum of six years. My immediate predecessor was Lord Rooker, who had served for 27 years, and who is now in another place not too far from here.

I say all this because the Boundary Commission has paid no attention whatsoever to the issues raised by the hon. Member for Telford and my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton about communities and the people who live in them. As the hon. Member for Telford said, it has not taken into account the number of people who are not on the electoral register. As a result of the electoral registration process initiated by the Government, I have effectively lost more than 10% of my constituency. The senior member of the household used to be responsible for registering all the other members, but that is no longer the case. What that does, quite maliciously, is take the vote away from young people who are not necessarily living at home, and who may be in education or trying to get on to the work ladder. The Government know that young people tend not to want to stuff letters into the post to register their vote. This has been done deliberately. We have organised a number of drives in an attempt to return those young people to the register, because it is very important for that to happen.

If these boundary changes are to take place in the period that we are discussing, what we need is not a census but a proper system of registration that makes people responsible for registering properly. The Government—not just on this occasion, but on consecutive occasions whenever they have been in office—have engaged in a deliberate ploy to cut the franchise and prevent people from electing the MPs they want. The Bill would raise the ceiling from 5% to 10%, which would prevent those changes from happening.

Most of the bottom half of my constituency—mainly in the Lozells and East Handsworth and Handsworth Wood wards—contains some of the most deprived communities, and in some areas more than 40% of people are not registered to vote. New and younger residents do not understand the registration system in the same way as the older ones. Not only are those people blocked from voting, but, more importantly, they cannot secure finance, or anything else of that sort. Non-registration has a huge effect on those communities.

I said at the start of my speech that the Boundary Commission had torn my constituency asunder. In Birmingham we have huge wards—or had huge wards; the commission will change that in February. So far, the wards have contained 20,000 people. The commission has torn the constituency apart. It has aligned the top half, which consists of Oscott ward, with the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), who is not here at the moment.

It is necessary to understand Oscott and the circumstances of the people who live there. The main dual carriageway crosses Walsall South into Oscott, and those people do not cross the carriageway. There is a combined community, which is served by Birmingham City Council rather than by Walsall Council. It will be difficult enough for an MP to represent two district councils, let alone how difficult people will find it to understand where they should go to receive the service that they used to receive. The commission is ignoring the needs of the community by carelessly trying to lump it in with another district.

The Perry Barr ward—the constituency is named after it—is partly in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey). The ward is long rather than compact, which means that it will belong to my hon. Friend. Most of the inhabitants live near the end furthest from Erdington; the small community at the other end is cut off, because
Mr Mahmood: The hon. Gentleman cannot have been listening to me: my point is about the connection between the communities that we have, and we want to keep them together. "[Interruption.] They will not be together under the boundary changes, because they will be divided between two different local authorities.

Michelle Donelan: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Mahmood: No, I am sorry, but I must conclude.

What I am asking for is an understanding of what my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton wants to do. It is important to keep such communities together. The Boundary Commission had a duty to do that—to look after communities and people. We are here discussing this matter because the Government have not provided proper registrations for such communities. If they had done so, we would not be looking at boundary changes. I commend my hon. Friend for introducing this Bill.

10.22 am

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): First, I should declare an interest—although it is not strictly an interest—as the Minister who took through the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011. I feel some obligation to defend the very sensible proposals and arrangements that Parliament legislated for in that Act, as they are under attack from what are, I must say, some of the most ridiculous arguments I have ever heard—and I will come on to that last one.

I do, however, thank the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) for the opportunity to debate these issues again. I am afraid that one or two of my hon. Friends in this House are also slightly anorakish on this subject. "[Interruption.] One or two of them are waving at me. I, too, always enjoy the opportunity to talk about these important constitutional matters.

First, I will deal head-on with some of the arguments the hon. Gentleman made, and there are a couple of other things I want to say before I turn to the Bill before us. The hon. Gentleman talked about trust in politics. That is indeed very important, but I should share with the House a point that arose when we first discussed and legislated for these proposals. I hope colleagues do not find this too devastating, but when we announced to the public that one of our key proposals was to reduce the number of Members of Parliament from 650 to 600, although I know we would all like to think that the people of the UK were distraught that there were going to be 50 fewer of us, for quite a time it was the single most popular coalition Government policy.

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): I hate to rain on my right hon. Friend’s parade, but if we had a proposal to abolish Parliament entirely, that would also be particularly popular, would it not?

Mr Harper: I would not go quite as far as that, as there is a serious point about representation, but the public were certainly not devastated by the idea of a modest reduction in the size of the House. The other place is, I think, the second largest legislative Chamber in the world after the Chinese National People’s Congress, and this lower House of Parliament is one of the largest...
lower Houses, and I thought that our modest proposal to reduce the number of MPs from 650 to 600 was a perfectly sensible step forward.

The explanatory notes to the Bill were prepared by the Public Bill Office on behalf of the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton, so I do not know whether the following point was put in by that office or by him. We have made the case that reducing the number of MPs from 650 to 600 saves some £13 million per year, which is £66 million over the course of a Parliament. That might be modest in terms of our overall spending, but I think the general public would think that saving £66 million that we could then spend on important public priorities like the national health service was quite important. Interestingly, the explanatory notes talk about the broader context and suggest that there will be a reduction in the cost of politics—the hon. Gentleman alluded to this—associated with the 73 MEPs who will disappear when we leave the European Union. In our debates in this House on Brexit—I promise colleagues I will digress on this only briefly, as we have plenty more days to come over the coming weeks—when we make assertions about what we thought the referendum result meant, colleagues often say, “Well, that wasn’t on the ballot paper.” I am sorry that we did not think about this at the time, but if we had said to voters that when we leave the EU we will not have the 73 MEPs and said at the same time that we were going to use that as a cunning plan to reinstate the 50 MPs going in the law as legislated for, many voters might have thought twice. I am only sorry that I did not think of making that argument in the referendum campaign, given that I was on the remain side of the argument, as we might have had a little more success. I do not think that is a sensible argument, however.

I say to the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton—I may have misheard, but I think the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood) agreed with him on this—that just because there are no MEPs in place it does not mean that suddenly a lot of extra work will come to this House. There are quite a lot of things that the EU does, and that MEPs spend all their time addressing, that actually would be better just not done at all. We can make sensible judgments in this House about what we want the Government and Parliament to focus on, and picking up every single thing that MEPs do is not very sensible.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): On the point of reducing the cost of democracy, is it not the case that the Conservatives have stacked the other place with 260 new appointees, increasing the cost of democracy by some £34 million?

Mr Harper: I am glad the hon. Gentleman raised that point. It is certainly the case that there are more Members of the House of Lords, because at present, although they can retire, fairly enough when it is suggested to someone who has a life appointment with a considerable income attached to it that they should retire, very few choose to do so—although, to be fair, more of them have been retiring recently than previously. To repeat what I said in my admittedly slightly too long intervention, although there are more Members of the House of Lords, we made an attempt to reform the other place, but Parliament was not completely sold on the idea; and the fact is that the cost of running the House of Lords has fallen since 2010, not increased. It is true that there are more Members of the House of Lords, but the running costs have fallen because of the savings made.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Is the right hon. Gentleman therefore saying that the cost of politics and the number of Members are not linked? His argument that the simple way to cut costs in this place is to reduce the number of MPs is undermined by his own evidence.

Mr Harper: Not at all. I have made the point that the other place has managed to reduce its costs, but importantly, its Members do not have any constituents to represent. It has made some savings. I have suggested that we could save costs by reducing the size of this House quite modestly. We would still remain a very large lower House of Parliament compared with many others.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): To extend my right hon. Friend’s argument, we could achieve even greater cost-cutting by cutting the number of Lords who do not take their daily allowance of £300.

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend is right, but I do not want to dilate too much on the other place as I am still pursuing the first argument that the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton made in favour of his Bill.

The second part of the hon. Gentleman’s first argument, which dealt with trust in politics, was about the size of constituencies. He was talking about their geographical size. We obviously represent physical parts of the country, but it is the people in those constituencies that we represent, not the spaces. My hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) agreed with his proposition that we should have seats of broadly equal numbers of constituents, because it is only then that the weight of those constituents’ views can be broadly the same across the country. That proposition was espoused by the Chartists many years ago.

We obviously do not want exact electoral equality between constituencies, because we have to take into account other important factors, which I will say more about in a moment, but we need to have broad equality. When we brought forward the original legislation, we set a range of +/-5%, which means that the number of constituents could vary by 10%. I want to give the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton some credit here. The former Member Pat Glass brought forward a similar Bill almost a year ago—this is a sort of anniversary of Labour’s attempt to go backwards in terms of sensible boundaries—and she set a range of +/-10%, which would have given a 20% variance. I welcome the fact that the hon. Gentleman thought that that was too big and has reduced the range to +/-7.5%, giving a 15% variance. That is of course welcome; when someone moves in your direction, it would be churlish not to give him credit for doing so.

We need to stick fairly rigidly to broad equality, but boundary commissions can take into account a number of other factors. My constituency neighbour across the water, the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew), seemed to suggest that boundary commissions could not take into account any of those considerations. He talked about those things being swept away completely. It is
[Mr Harper] worth going back to the legislation, which makes it clear that they have to stick to the rule about broad equality but can take into account special geographical considerations, local government boundaries, boundaries of existing constituencies, any local ties and any inconveniences attached to them. They can take all those factors into account.

Obviously, we are not talking today about the specific proposals brought forward by the boundary commissions, but I have taken a cursory look at the changes that they have made. It is clear from the evidence they have taken, and the changes they made between their initial proposals and their subsequent proposals, that many local people made clear representations about the factors I have just set out. The boundary commissioners listened to those concerns and made significant changes as a result.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Notwithstanding what the right hon. Gentleman has just said, does he acknowledge that the boundary commission is still proposing a “Devonwall” seat, which ignores the strong identities of Devon and Cornwall and matches them together, and which would be truly unpopular?

Mr Harper: I am familiar with that issue. The hon. Gentleman might not be aware that when we were originally taking the legislation through, that issue was raised with me by colleagues from both Devon and Cornwall. Indeed, I think this was the issue that prompted my right hon. Friend the former Member of Parliament for Witney and Prime Minister to make his unfortunate comment about the width of the River Tamar, which got him into a bit of hot water with colleagues from both Devon and Cornwall and which I think he may have come to regret. We had a debate about the issue, and I recognise that my views were not entirely popular, but it was about ensuring that areas were properly represented. One solution put forward by the then Members in Cornwall constituencies was to have less representation in this House. As the Minister responsible, I did not think that that was very sensible. I think that people should be represented properly.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr and others have spoken about local government boundaries. It is worth remembering that we are not proposing to move constituents anywhere. If there are changes to parliamentary boundaries, the constituents do not move. The councils that they get their local services from do not move. The only inconvenience in this process is that, heaven forfend, Members of Parliament might have to talk to an extra local government chief executive. Most of my constituency is coterminous with the Forest of Dean District Council, and I liaise with the officers and elected councillors of that council, but one of my wards is in the borough of Tewkesbury, which I share with my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson). That one ward contains just under 4,000 constituents, who are important to me, as are all my constituents. It means that I have to spend time dealing with another set of councillors and local government officers, but I do not find that to be enormously troublesome, and it causes my constituents no inconvenience at all. I suspect that they spend absolutely no moments in the day thinking about it.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: One of the problems with the boundary review is that in many areas, including mine, local government boundary changes have meant that the proposed areas do not even cover coterminous wards, and some wards would be cut in half. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that allowing some flexibility would solve that problem?

Mr Harper: I recognise that there are complexities due to local government boundaries, but I have to say that Members of Parliament are probably the only people who, when driving around the country, see boundaries in front of us as we cross them. I do not know whether other Members have a similar experience, but as I drive past the various signs on the M4, I think of myself passing through the constituencies of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) and my hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Robert Buckland). But let us be frank, that is something that only those of us involved in politics do. Normal people—the constituents we represent—do not see the country as a succession of ward and local government boundaries. Perhaps I am doing them a disservice, but I suspect that if I asked my constituents where the local government boundaries were, most of them would be unable to tell me. And, funnily enough, I do not think that that makes their lives any less exciting and fulfilled.

Gareth Snell: I agree that we are the only people who go around the country getting excited about boundaries, but does the right hon. Gentleman agree that people identify with small towns, villages and other communities, and that a 5% threshold would make alignment very difficult in some places? There are examples in constituencies represented by Members on both sides of the House of small towns, villages and clusters of communities, all of which identify as a community, now being split because of that very tight threshold.

Mr Harper: I accept that, but we have to balance these things, which is what the boundary commissions do.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Harper: I am conscious that I have dealt with only the first argument that the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton set out, and I want to make some progress before I take any more interventions.

The hon. Gentleman’s second point, which related to MEPs, was about workload. I have dealt with costs, but I want to take the workload issue head on, because there is a flipside relating to devolution, so he should be careful about going down this road. When we brought forward the initial proposals in the 2011 Act, we had to think through how the country was to be represented. At the moment, certain parts of the United Kingdom are perhaps over-represented in this House relative to their population. Wales, for example, has considerably more Members of Parliament than it would be entitled to on the basis of its population, which is why both sets of proposals would reduce the number of Members of Parliament to which Wales was entitled.
Representations were made to me that the parts of the UK with devolved government—those covered by the Scottish Parliament, and the Assemblies in Wales and Northern Ireland—should have less representation in this House because the casework aspect of our job is shared with the representatives in those bodies. In Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, where health is a devolved matter, one could argue that cases about the health service—when I take up such cases as an English Member of Parliament, I raise them with the Secretary of State for Health, who is responsible for the health service in England—would be properly dealt with in the devolved Assemblies. I rejected that argument at the time, because I felt that we needed to ensure that all voters who elect people to this House were treated evenly, but if we follow the hon. Gentleman’s Bill would move from us having a boundary review every Parliament, which was what we suggested, to having one every 10 years. I had to smile to myself when he talked about the tradition of having boundary reviews about every 10 years, because we have not had a full boundary review for almost 20 years. If we do not manage to get a boundary review before the next general election, the registers on which the next election will be fought will be 22 years old, meaning that some people who will be voting at the next general election would not even have been born when the registers were compiled.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): My right hon. Friend inadvertently says that the registers would be 22 years old, but he meant to say that the boundaries will be based on registers that are 22 years old. The registers will actually be completely up to date.

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend makes a good point. I am grateful to him. The registers are absolutely up to date. The boundaries, however, are based on registers from 2000, meaning that we have not had a boundary review for some considerable time. That is important, because the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton was talking about the change that comes along with such reviews.

I accept that a boundary review that reduces the number of MPs from 650 to 600 and takes place 20 years after the last one will inevitably involve a lot of change to parliamentary boundaries. The reason we thought it sensible to have a boundary review every Parliament is that there is a choice once we have had that big change: either we have relatively frequent but smaller changes to parliamentary boundaries, or we have less frequent but more significant changes. My view, and the view that the then coalition Government and the House took when the 2011 Act was passed, was that it was better to have more frequent smaller changes. On balance, having reflected on that before today and while listening to the hon. Gentleman’s speech, I think that that is right. If we have boundary reviews only once every 10 years, they will just be bigger and more disruptive, so smaller, less disruptive reviews are probably to be welcomed.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): The issue is not having a boundary review, but what has initiated it, which is the reduction in the number of MPs from 650 to 600. If we compare the average number of constituents in 1955 with the present day, the proposals in the review will increase that number by 40%.

Mr Harper: If we look at the existing range of constituency sizes—excluding the small protected island constituencies—we see that some Members represent mainland constituencies with perhaps only 40,000 electors, but others represent constituencies with nearly 100,000 voters. They seem to manage perfectly well, so I do not think that we will find things enormously challenging. I see that my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) is in the Chamber. Her constituency is one of the largest in the country by population, and she does a fantastic job of representing her constituents in this House. Her local authority is seeking significant planning permission for house building to deal with the housing crisis, which means that her constituency numbers will grow considerably.

I have talked about the size of this lower House, and we represent relatively few people compared with legislators in comparable lower Houses. It would therefore not be impossible for us to have slightly more constituents each, on average, than at present.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: The right hon. Gentleman says that we represent fewer constituents than Members of similar legislatures, but that does not seem to be the case. If we look at the figures for Commonwealth legislatures, Cyprus has 14,000 people per representative and Jamaica has 34,000. If we look at the Nordic countries, we see that Norway has 30,000 people per MP. On what evidence is he basing his assertion? I am rather confused.

Mr Harper: The hon. Gentleman obviously has a very narrow view of the Commonwealth.

Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): The obvious example to cite is India. According to a House of Commons briefing, it has on average 2,192,379 electors per representative.

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend makes a good point. I am not proposing that we reduce the size of this Parliament to that extent, but if a legislator in a similar type of system is capable of representing more than 2 million people, I do not that our rather modest changes should be completely beyond our wit.

I turn now to what the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton and other Opposition Members called the 2 million missing voters. That refers to the fact that electoral registration increased after the compilation of the 2015 registers, which are being used for the current review, and after the referendum, which was a big electoral
event. The hon. Gentleman referred to the missing voters as if they were somehow not being taken into account, and Pat Glass said the same when she introduced her Bill last year. The important thing for a boundary review—my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) alluded to this in his point about the registers being up to date—is not the absolute number of electors, but how those electors are distributed across the country. The only thing that will make a difference to the number of seats is if the distribution of the electors changes substantially.

I must confess that I have not seen an up-to-date piece of work, but the excellent Matt Singh of Number Cruncher Politics published an interesting paper on 16 September 2016 in which he looked at that particular objection to our boundary review to see whether it made sense. He looked in a detailed, analytical way at the extra voters who came on to the electoral register ahead of the referendum to see whether they were distributed in a way that would cause a significant change if the boundary review were restarted with those registers. His short conclusion bears repeating:

“So to sum up, amid lots of misleading claims and counterclaims, there is a legitimate question about the effect of the date at which registration figures were taken.”

That was the point raised by the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton. The paper continued:

“But a detailed analysis of these figures and the subsequent 2 million increase in registration in the run up to the EU referendum provides the answer. The data does not support the suggestion that using the later version of the register would materially alter the distribution of seats. Instead it points to a very even distribution of the 2 million newly-registered voters between Conservative and Labour areas.”

That reflects well on Members on both sides of the House from across the country, because it shows that, in the run-up to that significant voting event, which we now know will change the direction and route this country takes, they did a fantastic job either of doing registration drives or of inspiring voters to register in a consistent way across the United Kingdom, rather than in a partial way that might have changed the distribution. The fact that some of those voters are not on the register that is being used for the current boundary review does not materially affect the distribution of seats across the country.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): The right hon. Gentleman has covered a great deal of ground, but will he cover the obvious ground? After spending £3 million, the Government know that the boundary review cannot get a parliamentary majority.

Mr Harper: I would prefer to test the opinion of Parliament, and we may or may not test Parliament’s opinion today. The right process is to do what is set out in legislation. The boundary commissions in the four parts of the United Kingdom will report by October 2018. Orders will then be brought before this House and the other place, and we will vote on them. They might get through; they might not—I do not know the answer to that question. We have not seen the final proposals from the boundary commissions. In fact, we have not even seen the final draft proposals for some parts of the UK. The opinion of the House will be tested in due course. If we were to take a view before a boundary review even started on whether we thought it would be approved by Parliament, I suspect we would never have a boundary review.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr has now disappeared from the Chamber, but he spoke about large wards. He is perfectly right that, in urban areas, the building blocks of parliamentary constituencies—local government wards—tend to be larger. I accept that was a problem in the abortive review that was not brought to fruition. The computer kit that the Boundary Commission for England used to do all the mapping could not split local government wards very well, but my understanding is that the commission has fixed the problem with support from the Cabinet Office and that it is now perfectly possible to split local government wards in urban areas. Trying to keep such wards together makes a boundary review difficult.

I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman is not here, because I want to deal with his point about crime. It was effectively about working together, but I did not understand his argument—Conservative Members were looking slightly amazed as he made it. Let us take his example of Birmingham. He has a police force that covers the whole west midlands, and Birmingham has a city council and a number of parliamentary constituencies. My hunch is that Birmingham Members of Parliament do what Members of Parliament do in my county of Gloucestershire: when there are common issues that concern us all and that cross boundaries, we work together. The election of the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew), unfortunately for my party, meant that Gloucestershire was no longer completely represented by Conservatives.

Dr Drew: That’s democracy.

Mr Harper: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, but I am perfectly happy to work with him on common areas of concern, even though he represents a different political party. If we change parliamentary boundaries so that a particular part of a city or area is to be represented by two different Members of Parliament, the idea that somehow they will be incapable of working together, and with their police force and local authority, to deal with an important matter such as crime and the safety of their constituents is, frankly, nonsense. That was why Members were laughing at what the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr said. They were not laughing at a serious issue; they were laughing at the idea that people cannot work together to solve such important problems.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I am another west midlands MP with a very small constituency, and it might be worth the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood) recognising that we also have the west midlands Mayor, Andy Street. We are very used to working together across boundaries.

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Devolution of local government also goes back to the point about workloads. Again, it demonstrates that different areas of the country are grouped together for certain purposes, and we have seen that level of devolution
in the west midlands and we are seeing considerable levels of devolution in Greater Manchester under the Mayor, Andy Burnham.

Afzal Khan: Hear, hear!

Mr Harper: I am a great believer in that level of devolution. The hon. Gentleman is a distinguished former local government leader, and I do think that decisions in this country are too centralised. Giving important areas of the country with political leadership the ability to make more decisions for themselves is welcome.

Of course, there is nothing to prevent people from working together. I was impressed when I visited Manchester as a Minister in the Department for Work and Pensions. I met the leader of Trafford Council, Councillor Sean Anstee, who is one of the local government leaders in Greater Manchester. He told me that local government leaders, even though they are of different political persuasions, have a shared vision on some of the big challenges for that area of the country. They are able to work together, notwithstanding their political differences. That blows out of the water the argument of the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr about boundaries. It is perfectly possible for us all to work together.

I had planned to make a couple more relevant points before saying a word or two about the Bill. Obviously, I have just been addressing the five arguments of the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton in favour of the Bill—I hope hon. Members feel I have adequately dealt with those arguments and have been persuaded.

There has been quite a bit of discussion about voter registration. Again, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr made some allegations about that, and I am disappointed he has not stayed around to listen to a response. He said that we have made it difficult to register to vote and that we have tried to drive people off the register, which simply is not true and is not borne out by the facts.

The Electoral Commission published a report in July on electoral registration at the June 2017 general election, and the report makes it clear that “more than 2.9 million” applications to register to vote were made in Great Britain between the Prime Minister’s announcement on 18 April and the deadline for applications. Ninety-six per cent. of those applications were made through the online service—I had the privilege of kicking off that service when I was Minister for Political and Constitutional Reform—which has made it much easier for people to register to vote. More than two thirds of those online applications were made by people aged under 34. I do not use 34 as a proxy for young; it is simply a fact that the Electoral Commission put in its report. The idea that, somehow, we have made it difficult for people to vote when all they have to do is use an electronic device to register online is simply not borne out by the truth.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: That is not the case for those who are homeless or for a number of other people who do not have a fixed abode. Does the right hon. Gentleman recognise that those people are disadvantaged by the new system?

Mr Harper: No. I accept that some people may not be able to use the electronic method, but they are of course able to register in the traditional way. I think I am right in saying, although the Minister will be able to confirm this, that many local authorities go to considerable lengths to make sure people who might be disadvantaged are registered to vote. I know many local authorities make great efforts to make sure homeless people are registered. Under the law those local authorities have a duty to get as many people legitimately registered as possible.

That bring us to the other part of the argument, because the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr said that people disappeared from the register. Yes, they did, because the registration process does two things. It deals not only with making sure the register is as complete as possible, so that everyone who is entitled to vote is on it, but with making sure that it is accurate and that only those people who are eligible to vote are on it. Many of the people who left the register when we introduced the new voter registration system were, in a sense, not really people at all. Many of them were people who were no longer in those constituencies and should no longer have been registered to vote but had not been removed from the register, and some of them were no longer alive and that had not been taken into account.

On accuracy, I also come back to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex about how up to date the register is, as the other thing to remember is that the current boundaries are based on electoral registers from 2000. So however imperfect the current process may be, if we do not get this review done and have the boundaries implemented, Members are saying that they are comfortable for seats to be drawn on the basis of registers from 2000. That means that at the next election we would have the absurdity of people voting who were not alive when the registers on which the seats were founded were put together. That is absurd and it needs to be changed.

Kevin Foster: My right hon. Friend made some interesting points about the registration process. Does he agree that it is bizarre to be hearing in the 21st century arguments that electoral registrations should still be based on a concept of male heads of households formed in the 19th century, as the old system was?

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about that. We had an argument about this at the time, and the concept that the head of household, who was invariably the man, should be responsible for registering people was rather out of date. Putting that responsibility on individuals is an improvement. As I said, all the evidence suggests, and the fact that a lot of people registered to vote in the referendum demonstrates, that this is not a difficult process. It is straightforward. The online registration system is much easier.

The only significant Electoral Commission recommendation—the Minister ought to reflect on this point—related to the problem that in the current system it is not easy for people to check electronically that they are already registered. A significant proportion of the people who tried to get registered for the general election were already registered and these were duplicate registrations. That puts a burden on electoral registration officers at a very busy time, and there would be some sense in our reflecting on whether we can improve the online system to deal with that.
Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the longer this boundary review is delayed without being implemented, the greater the unfairness becomes, particularly with regard to rural seats, which, in the main, have seen a large increase in population?

Mr Harper: My right hon. Friend makes a good point. We are not carrying out this process at a massively fast pace, and the boundary changes should have come into force some time ago, but there was an unholy alliance between the official Opposition and the Liberal Democrats. I do not see any Liberal Democrats here today, which is surprising, because they are normally fascinated beyond all bounds of reasonableness with constitutional matters. As this Bill is of a constitutional nature, I am amazed that there is not a single Liberal Democrat here to debate it. I worked closely with them in the coalition Government—

Dr Drew: You finished them off.

Mr Harper: The hon. Gentleman says we finished them off, but I do not think we quite did that, as there are still some of them left. I am amazed that none of them have troubled themselves to come to Parliament to debate this constitutional matter.

I come to the last couple of things I wanted to say about this Bill. [Interruption.] My hon. Friends must not tempt me. You were not in the Chair at the beginning of this debate, Madam Deputy Speaker, when Mr Deputy Speaker did us all a service by stopping us worrying that a dreadful mistake had taken place. When I looked at the Bill yesterday, I was astounded that on St Andrew’s day a Bill had been produced that seemingly had omitted the entire part of the United Kingdom known as Scotland and had also inadvertently put Northern Ireland in Great Britain. Those of us who follow the constitution carefully will know that that is something we should not do. Fortunately, I was able to hear the excellent point of order from my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson), who pointed that out yesterday—[Interruption.] He does not need to be here, because he is in his constituency, having made the point of order yesterday. Mr Deputy Speaker was able to answer it yesterday and make a statement, putting us all at our ease; there had been a simple, inadvertent printing error, and the official Opposition and one of its spokesmen had not inadvertently wiped out Scotland and confused where Northern Ireland went. I am pleased Mr Deputy Speaker was able to put us straight.

The only point I wanted to make about the Bill is that in clause 2(2) the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton has widened the variance from +/- 5% to +/- 7.5%. I touched on this in my opening remarks. It is welcome, and the hon. Gentleman is suggesting, having said we ought to get on and do this, that instead of the boundary commissioners reporting by October next year, when we could get the boundary reports in front of this House, we should delay a boundary review until October 2020. In one sense, I do not have a problem with that, because under the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 we are not due a general election until 2022. However, I thought the Labour party’s position was that it wanted a general election as quickly as possible, and therefore delaying the boundary review by a further two years would seem to be a problem.

I wish to put one final point on the record, although it is in the Bill. It is worth making the point that significant financial provisions are contained in the Bill, because money is spent in two ways. The number of Members of Parliament is increased from that set out in the current law, which would reduce the number of Members of Parliament, so a significant cost is involved there. Another boundary review would be necessitated, in addition to the one that is almost complete, so a significant cost is involved there, too. The explanatory notes show that if this Bill is to make further progress a money resolution would be required.

I think I have dealt comprehensively with all the arguments that the hon. Gentleman put forward in favour of his Bill. If the opinion of the House is tested, I hope colleagues will be persuaded not to give it a Second Reading, and I thank the House for its indulgence.

11.9 am

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Some of us have great trust in the current proposals, and want to preserve his legacy. I do get a sense of déjà vu, because of course I was the shadow Cabinet Office Minister this time last year, and I remember the right hon. Gentleman making virtually the same speech. I hope that the House will forgive me, but I will do almost the same.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) for tabling the Bill. We are all largely in agreement that a review is needed; updating boundaries is a vital part of the functioning of our electoral system. However, it must proceed in a way that benefits our whole democracy and not just the short-term interests of one political party.

The Opposition strongly oppose a reduction in the number of parliamentary constituencies and welcome measures in the Bill to maintain the size of the House of Commons at 650 Members, correcting a decision taken by the coalition Government to have 600, a purely arbitrary number for which no logical case has been made. The cynic in me would suggest that it was chosen purely for political advantage.

Kevin Hollinrake: Surely the logical case is that that number is less, and therefore the cost of running this House will be less. Is that not logical?

Andrew Gwynne: I will come on to those points, because the hon. Gentleman will find that the cost of politics is already being cut in a number of ways. The duty of this House is to ensure that the Government
are held to account, and my concern is that the proposal to reduce the number lessens scrutiny on the Government of the day. That might not be a Conservative Government, and I would hope that the hon. Gentleman would want to preserve his rights, when he sits on the Opposition Benches, to hold a future Labour Government to account.

The lack of clarity from the Government has concerned many across the Chamber. The Government have stated that the boundary review is proceeding in accordance with legislation, but, according to three senior sources quoted in The Times, the plan is likely to be scrapped due to a lack of support from the Conservative Benches—[Interruption.] I hear “Hear, hears”. Perhaps this will be the latest casualty following the Prime Minister’s failure to win a majority in June.

If the review is going to be ditched, I say to the Government: stop wasting public money. This is a charade. Let’s ditch the review now and start a fresh one based on principles we can all agree on. Suggestions that this is being done to cut the cost of politics are red herrings. The claimed savings of £13 million a year are dwarfed by the £34 million annual cost of the 260 extra peers appointed by the former Prime Minister. Can the Government seriously talk about cutting the cost of politics after offering £1 billion to the Democratic Unionist party? The contradictions in the Government’s arguments are so blatant it is insulting. This Bill proposed by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton has clearly listened and responded accordingly. The Opposition welcome measures in the Bill to have a fixed allocation of 18 Members of this House and to keep the protected areas already legislated for in 2011.

Our opposition is shared by many. The Hansard Society found no rationale for the Government’s decision, noting that there was a “real concern” that the number had been “plucked from thin air—600 simply being a neat number.” The Political and Constitutional Reform Committee called on the Government to reverse their decision, stating that there had been a complete absence of consultation or research into the impact on Member’s roles and functions.

On the electoral roll, constituencies must represent the communities they serve. This Government may try to stack the deck in their favour by drawing the boundaries based on the December 2015 electoral register, but since then more than 2 million more people have been added to the electoral roll following the increase in registration at the EU referendum and the 2017 general election.

It is easy for the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean to say that the first review would result in major changes and subsequent reviews in minor changes, but that depends on where the additional registration has taken place. In Bristol West in the run-up to the general election, there was a 12% increase in registration. Similar large increases were seen in Leeds Central, Leeds North West, Bethnal Green and Bow, Poplar and Limehouse and Wolverhampton South East. In this year alone, 1.1 million additional voters were added to the register, and a third of those were in London and the south-east. If we have concentrations of increases, we will have the domino effect that we have all been subject to in the first major review, so subsequent reviews will also be pretty extensive.

Any constitutional changes should be done fairly, with everyone given a voice. That is not what the Government and the boundary review have done. We welcome the Bill, which addresses these failings and sets electorate calculations using the 2017 electoral roll. It has been clear from the start that the Government have been interested only in their own political advantage rather than what is in the best interests of the country. We therefore welcome the Bill, which will address the failings of this Government and ensure that a fresh boundary review can go ahead in a way that benefits our democracy, and not just the narrow interests of the Conservative party.

11.19 am

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): In answer to the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), who accuses us of pursuing political advantage, I would simply point out that we are pursuing a fairer distribution of constituencies, which, even though it might be to our advantage, puts Members on the
Government Benches on the moral high ground, rather than defending the present distribution of constituencies, which is clearly unfair. I will come back to that point later.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) on the Bill, although we all suspect that he might have had some help. The enthusiasm of the Opposition Front-Bench team for the Bill suggests that—well, we all like co-operating with our colleagues in the House, don’t we?

The remit of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee includes the requirement to consider constitutional matters, and this includes parliamentary elections and boundaries. I draw the House’s attention to the report issued by our predecessor Committee, the Public Administration Select Committee, in the 2010 Parliament, entitled, “Smaller Government: What do Ministers do?”, since it addresses the consequences of reducing the size of the House of Commons for the relationship between the Commons and the Government, as has been touched upon already. I will return to that later.

The views I express today are my own, but I approach consideration of the Bill in the spirit of PACAC’s core purpose—namely, “to conduct robust and effective scrutiny in order to help create conditions where the public can have justified confidence in public services/government”.

That leads me immediately to express concern about one key provision in the Bill. The House, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), can note with satisfaction that the Bill accepts several key principles established in the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011. It accepts that the size of the House of Commons should be restricted to a defined number, which has never been the case before, to prevent a return to the so-called ratchet effect, whereby the size of the House tended to increase as the population grew; it accepts the primacy of the principle of an electoral quota over any other statutory factor in determining the size of a constituency; and it accepts the 2011 revision of the consultation process and the removal of interim reviews.

I ask myself, therefore, why the Bill does not accept that deviations from the quota should be limited to the 5% limit established in the 2011 Act, rather than changing it to a 7.5% allowance. If one believes in electoral equality and fairness, one should favour the existing 5% provision, which achieves this more effectively than the proposed 7.5% provision would. For demographic reasons, wider disparities in constituency sizes have historically favoured the Labour party in England. The fact that the Bill does not propose returning to the 10% quota deviation, which the Labour party previously supported, implicitly concedes the substance of the equality argument—that the 10% deviation was unfair.

The fact that the boundary commissions have mostly completed their recommendations for new boundaries and that they allow only a 5% deviation also confirms that this is perfectly achievable. To propose 7.5% is simply an attempt to turn the clock back from a fairer voting system. Unless the Bill’s promoter can somehow argue that 7.5% is actually fairer and therefore would command greater public confidence, he should concede that the 5% deviation should be maintained. Of course, some communities will feel they have been put into the wrong constituency, but that always occurs, whatever the rules say.

I can personally be completely neutral on this point. Not only will my constituency be more or less the same after the boundary changes—though, sadly, I will lose the town of Harwich itself—but the constituency that Samuel Pepys represented when he was first elected in 1679 is almost identical to the shape of the one I represent today. [HON. MEMBERS: “Do you keep a diary?”] I am not going to read out my diaries. Those of us who have coastal constituencies are innocent bystanders to some of the turbulence that affects inland constituencies.

We should sympathise, however. The point made by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood), who is not in his place, is not to be dismissed, because we like to be elected and to serve as leaders of our communities, and if those communities are not coherent, that makes it more difficult. But let us be absolutely clear: that is an ancillary purpose of being elected a Member of Parliament; our primary job is to represent the national interest and our constituents in Parliament, not to represent Parliament in our constituencies. Sometimes in these debates about the role of MPs, we, and others, tend to lose sight of our primary purpose.

Current legislation provides for exceptions, such as the four island constituencies and the geographically very large constituencies, and the Bill accepts them as well, but not the 5% rule, even though it has been accepted in nearly every other part of the country. Perhaps the Labour supporters of the Bill prefer 7.5% over 5% because they believe that it might advantage their party. I fully accept that my party is keen on 5%, but that is only because it reduces potential unfair electoral disadvantage. It cannot be argued that we have made the electoral system less fair.

On the use of more up-to-date electoral data, I have considerably more sympathy with the Bill. The fresher the data, the better. That said, I take the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean—in the tangle of his rather long speech, this was by far the most important point—that we cannot jump at this opportunity to change the legislation until we can be certain that cancelling the current boundary review will not cause other unsurmountable and practical problems or too much cost and uncertainty. I can assure him and the Minister that PACAC will be taking evidence from the boundary commissions in the new year and asking them for clear advice on this question, and I am sure that in doing so we will want to pick up on many of the points raised in today’s debate.

On the size of the House of Commons, I am actually rather sympathetic to the retention of 650 constituencies. We have heard in evidence to PACAC and in this House how Brexit means that parts of Government are having to increase their resources to manage responsibilities being repatriated from the EU. This will give MPs more responsibilities and powers as well, not fewer: more UK Government activity to scrutinise, more areas of policy to consider that are the direct responsibility of the Government, and of course more legislation.
As we leave the EU, PACAC is also conducting an inquiry into the consequences for devolution in the UK, and this is leading me to change my view on the wisdom of reducing the number of MPs in the House of Commons, because Westminster has devolved some of its powers. First, this devolution of primary legislative powers applies only to a relatively small part of the population—there is no devolution of legislative powers in England, which accounts for 85% of the UK’s population, and therefore no meaningful reduction in the responsibilities at least of English MPs. Secondly, the present size of the House already reflects a reduction in representation in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Thirdly, it is becoming apparent that devolution in the UK is far from finished business. A PACAC report produced just this week, “Devolution and Exiting the EU and Clause 11 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill: Issues for Consideration”, highlights how we have previously tended to consider devolution as a binary question—powers are either reserved or devolved—but as we prepare to take back powers on matters such as agriculture, fisheries management and environmental protection, we find that there are powers we have to share among Westminster, Holyrood, Cardiff Bay and Stormont but for which there is precious little intergovernmental or inter-parliamentary machinery—in fact, there is no inter-parliamentary machinery. This machinery is necessary, however, if we are to ensure the reassurance and proper procedures for resolving and scrutinising disagreements. A failure to resolve disagreements amicably can quickly become toxic, as we are seeing in the debate over clause 11 of the EU withdrawal Bill.

Moreover, disputes will be resolved only where there is trust and understanding between individual Ministers from each Administration and between MPs from each of the Parliaments. We need to get to know each other better, and we need more regular meetings, but at present there is no provision in any budget for this to take place. Such institutional machinery will take up the time and energy of Ministers and MPs, and will be permanently required, as we see is common in other decentralised nations. Now is not the time to be reducing parliamentary capacity.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean referred to the fact that this House is one of the largest lower Houses. I think that is a false comparison, simply because the House of Lords is not elected—we are the only elected part of this Parliament. The French Assemblée Nationale has 577 Members for a similarly sized population, but there is also an elected Senate of 348 Members, so there are 925 elected parliamentarians serving the whole of France. We do not have a comparable number in this House, and do not plan to, even with 650 Members.

The number of MPs in the House of Commons has not been below 600 since 1800, when our population was considerably smaller than it is today. After the Republic of Ireland seceded from the UK in 1921, the number dropped to 615, but that was when the Government were spending well under 30% of GDP, with much of that on foreign affairs and defence. There was little welfare and no NHS. There was very little new legislation every year and far fewer public bodies. The workload of the House of Commons has vastly increased, to the extent that the vast majority of hon. and right hon. Members are now full-time, or virtually full-time, parliamentarians. We spend less time on primary legislation than we used to, but we barely look at the thousands of statutory instruments that pass through this House, which have increased from around 2,000 per year in the 1950s to 3,000 or more per year more recently, and Brexit means there will be more.

If we are not going to stick to the present size of the House of 650 MPs, the 2011 Act, which reduces the size of the House from 650 to 600, sits ill on our statute book, unless we also address the consequences for the number of Ministers. A PACAC report under my predecessor as Chair, Tony Wright, raised concerns about the numbers of Ministers in Government and the impact of those numbers on the size of the payroll vote and on the independence of the legislature.

That 2010 report was entitled “Too Many Ministers?”. It noted how the number of Ministers had grown steadily since 1900, doubling from 60 to 120, with the rate of increase particularly marked for Ministers below Cabinet level. Evidence submitted by the constitution unit to PAC for its further inquiry in 2011 “Smaller Government: What do Ministers do?” showed that the House of Commons has a larger number of Ministers in relation to its size than is the case in many other European countries. In 2010, the ratio of Ministers to Members of the House of Commons was 1:8, compared with 1:14 in Spain, 1:16 in Germany and 1:29 in France.

The increase in the number of Ministers has several detrimental effects. I appreciate that this is not a popular topic among MPs these days, most of whom hope for ministerial preferment and regard it as more likely if there are more jobs that the Prime Minister has to fill, but it has obviously been one of the reasons the number of Ministers has increased. However, there are downsides. The number of Ministers adds to the cost of politics. More Ministers make decision making across Government more complicated. Why has the Cabinet tended to grow and grow? That blurs lines of accountability.

However, as has already been pointed out, the most significant impact is on the independence of the legislature because it increases the relative size of the payroll vote. Those who hold a Government job are expected to vote with the Government or to resign, and the increase in the number of Ministers undermines the ability of the legislature to scrutinise the Government and to hold them to account. If we are going to reject this Bill and cut the size of the House of Commons, let us all agree at least that the number of Ministers should be reduced pro rata so that the ratio does not get any worse. In 2011, PACAC recommended that the reduction in number of MPs from 650 to 600 should be accompanied by a corresponding reduction in the number of Ministers.

The number of Ministers is already subject to two statutory limits: the House of Commons Disqualification Act 1975, which limits the number of Ministers who can sit in the House of Commons to 95, and the Ministerial and Other Salaries Act 1975, known as MOSA, which limits the number of ministerial salaries that can be paid to 109. Of course, that does not limit prime ministerial patronage in other ways. Neither Act covers Parliamentary Private Secretaries, unpaid Whips and other informal appointments, such as envoys or party appointments. Nor does MOSA limit the number of unpaid Ministers who can sit in the other place. There is also the question of the growth of a new breed of quasi-Minister, which comes from the appointment...
of non-executive directors of ministerial Departments. That has become a pathway to becoming a Minister, and there are a great number of such people who play a very valuable role. There is therefore no lack of capacity for Prime Ministers to influence and control Departments. That is not a reason to maintain the number of Ministers in the House of Commons.

A reduction in the size of the House of Commons by a little under 8% would require a reduction in the number of Ministers in the House of Commons by just seven, but I think that that is an important principle. Should we make that a condition of implementing the 2018 boundaries review of 600 seats? I leave that question hanging in the air. If the reduction is made without reducing the number of Ministers, the percentage of MPs who are Ministers rises from 14.6% to 15.8%. More significantly, in today’s House, paid Ministers represent 30% of Conservative MPs. In a reduced House, with an equivalent balance between the parties, that would increase to 33%—one third of all the Government’s MPs would be paid by the Government. We are meant to be against bribery and corruption in this place, but that is a way of controlling what MPs do.

PASC’s suggestions for reducing the number of Ministers in the Commons included reducing the absolute number of Ministers or appointing a larger proportion of Ministers from outside the Commons, by increasing the proportion of Ministers from the other place or by appointing Ministers who are not Members of either House—it is only a convention that Ministers are Members of Parliament.

I could not support the Bill as it stands, but I do regret that the Conservative party has become impaled on this commitment to reduce the number of MPs in the House of Commons, because I do not see colleagues in any part of the House hanging around without enough to do. I also regret all the more the fact that this reduction will result in a de facto increase in Government patronage relative to the size of the House. If we could have a fresh boundary review, keep 650 MPs, get that done in good time for a 2022 election and allow for a reduction will result in a de facto increase in Government patronage, for whatever reason, we seem to be reducing the number of representatives in this House. Important though it is that we look at how to save money, there are other and better ways we can do that, not the least of which, some of us would argue, includes scrapping the House of Lords. However, that would be for another day and another debate.

My arguments start with the contrary point to that of my neighbour, the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean. Yesterday I was stopped in the street by someone from Minchinhampton—which is, as he may remember, now in The Cotswolds constituency—begging me to take up a case on their behalf, saying, “Why don’t you come back and become our representative again?” In that boundary review, I argued the case for keeping Minchinhampton as part of Stroud. Those who know my area would hardly describe Minchinhampton as a bastion of socialism. It is probably as strong a Conservative ward as I have in the Stroud district, within the constituency and without. Locational representation matters in this place. It matters to the people outside more than we think it does. They like to know who their MP is. They may not always agree with them or always be of the same party, but when they come to us with their problems, they know enough about who we are, what we can do, and what we should do.

The relationship with our local authority matters. If these proposals go through as constituted, the Stroud district, which has only 100,000 people, will be represented by three different MPs. I think that is wrong. It leads to confusion and to bitterness because people want to know who their Member of Parliament is and want to know that they have a relationship with the local authority.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con) rose—

Dr Drew: I will give way briefly; we have lots of people waiting to speak.

Huw Merriman: The hon. Gentleman seems to be making the case for having no elections at all. I find that somewhat bizarre in a place such as this.

Dr Drew: As someone who has stood in seven parliamentary elections and knows his area rather better than the hon. Gentleman, I will take that as a slight rather than a positive intervention.

Location matters. It matters because geography matters, ties to an area matter, local authority representation matters, and the relationship with other constituencies matters. I could not represent any other area. No other area would have me! I am quite simply the MP for Stroud, the area I have always stood for. I would never stand for anywhere else because I believe that that is what I am best at, and I think I have done a reasonable job. I have been elected four times and lost three times, so, hey, I am ahead at the moment. It did not help my predecessor that in preparation for the boundary changes he moved his constituency office. That went down rather badly in the constituency and may not have helped his cause when we stood against each other again, as we have done on a number of occasions, for election earlier this year. Geographical representation has always had a right and proper that we keep the size of this House as it is. It is somewhat ludicrous that, with an ever-increasing population, for whatever reason, we seem to be reducing the number of representatives in this House. Important though it is that we look at how to save money, there are other and better ways we can do that, not the least of which, some of us would argue, includes scrapping the House of Lords. However, that would be for another day and another debate.
stronger hold on the way in which we decide on the electoral relationships than purely the numbers. If we want to do that, we might as well go to the Soviet system, where the constituencies are not even named—there is just a number and a way in which certain people are put in place. I believe in local representation and I will always argue that case.

As we have heard, in 2015 the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee savaged the Government’s approach to reducing the number of MPs. It argued very strongly that we should not just look at the numbers and proposed a 10% variance. I would still adhere to that, because I do not mind representing more people. I would rather that the people I represent—

Michelle Donelan: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr Drew: I will not give way now, because other people want to speak.

I would rather that the people in the district also have a relationship to the constituency. If that means that I have more electors, so be it. That can be reflected in some additional help with case work and so on. It is important that we tie these relationships together, and anything that undermines them is a bad thing.

Michelle Donelan: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Dr Drew: Very briefly.

Michelle Donelan: Does the hon. Gentleman concede, though, that it is impossible for an MP to give the same service as another MP who has half the number of constituents, and that he is actually doing down our democracy by suggesting that we continue to increase the variation between constituencies?

Dr Drew: The honest answer is no. When I talk to colleagues who represent urban constituencies, it is clear that their casework, which consists of much more on the immigration front than mine would, will take them an awful lot longer than I would spend on many of the cases that I have to deal with. That does not mean that I end up with an easier road; I just think it is very important that we understand that constituencies have different profiles and we should reflect that.

I want to bring my remarks to a speedy conclusion, because I—

Wendy Morton: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr Drew: No, I will not give way any more.

I want to bring my remarks to a speedy conclusion because it is important that this Bill is given proper air time. I could argue on the point about the 10% variance, but, more than anything, it is important that we have a proper debate on the appropriate numbers. We have heard the arguments about the Executive versus Back Benchers. We should also consider the importance of locational representation so that people know that whoever they elect, whether it is their parish council, district council, county council, or MP—we will not be electing MEPs any more—the line of accountability follows through. Anything that undermines that is a jolly bad thing.

As Stephen Lukes says in his epic book “Power: A Radical View”, this is about “power to” rather than “power over”. It is about how we evolve representation. I get very worried when we come up with a figure that has just been plucked out of the air and tell people that that is unimportant who represents them and where that representation comes from. I very much support this Bill. I hope that we will have a proper debate in Committee and on Report. I think it is the case—as all Members other than my neighbour the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean seem to have recognised—that in the current arrangements we have the wrong arrangements.

11.46 am

Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate and to follow two of my constituency neighbours—the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), who made an excellent speech. I am afraid that I may not be as fluent or have the same stamina as my right hon. Friend, but I will try to make some of the same points. I also will refer to some of the points made by my neighbour from Stroud, perhaps with a couple of local examples to show why I cannot agree with him on a number of his points about geographical representation.

I have always felt that the primary reason for these boundary changes was to have more equal votes and more equal-sized constituencies so that our constituencies could be more fairly represented in this place. As I will illustrate with some local examples, there are huge variations in the size of parliamentary constituencies, and that has made some people’s votes count more or less than others, depending on where they live. Clearly, equal representation of voters in this place is a fundamental democratic principle, and it is proper that our boundaries reflect that.

I will illustrate that with a local reference. My own constituency of Thornbury and Yate has an electorate of about 68,000, while that of the neighbouring constituency of The Cotswolds is over 80,000, and that of my neighbour, the hon. Member for Stroud, is about 83,000. While I understand that there are some bigger variations around the country, the 15,000 variance between two neighbouring constituencies is still important. Some people will argue—my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean made this point—that I have a large constituency in sheer geographical terms. In fact, Thornbury and Yate is larger than Kingswood, the Minister’s constituency, and Filton and Bradley Stoke—the other two constituencies in the local authority area—combined, but it has fewer electors than either of them.

I echo a point that has already been made: surely the job of a Member of Parliament is to represent the people who live in the constituency, not the landmass. It is the people—the electorate—who matter. I completely accept that there are a small number of exceptions to that rule, such as Orkney and Shetland, and the Isle of Wight, which have been discussed, but surely the people in Stroud and The Cotswolds deserve the same representation as the people in Thornbury and Yate.

We have talked a lot about local representation. The hon. Member for Stroud no doubt knows the village of Charfield very well, as it has close links to some towns in his constituency, and shares a lot of local services
and a local identity with his area. Under the proposed boundary changes, they would become part of the same constituency—that is right. When people in those towns go to the GPs in his constituency, as is the case when my constituents use the shops in Wotton, they do not think about which local authority area they fall under; they think about the links in the community.

We should also remember that under the new proposals a lot of communities would be strengthened and brought together. This is not just about dividing some existing communities; a lot of them will be improved by the current proposals, as has been recognised in some of the public consultations. Berkeley is perhaps one of the most Conservative wards in the hon. Gentleman’s and my constituency combined, and perhaps even in the constituency of my right hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean too. It was originally proposed to be part of the new constituency formed largely from Thornbury and Yate, but now it is proposed that it moves back into the Stroud constituency. It is right that local links have been reflected in proper public consultation. That shows that having an independent process, rather than a politically driven one, is a positive thing, despite that not necessarily being beneficial to either Member of Parliament representing those seats.

A number of Members have talked about the move to 600 MPs not being perfect in itself, but 650 is certainly not perfect in itself either. There has been some debate about holding reviews every five years, with this Bill proposing reviews every 10 years. I accept that there are some arguments about cost, but part of the reason I support boundary changes every five years is that I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean that it is surely better to have smaller, more frequent reviews that take into account changes in the electorate, rather than continuing the process that has happened over time of making rather significant boundary changes because the reviews are so infrequent.

That is especially the case for semi-rural areas that are expanding and taking on more developments. It is proposed that the west of England will have 105,000 new homes between now and 2036. Thousands of houses are proposed—I have already mentioned Charfield, which is expected to more than double in size if the current proposals go through. These semi-rural areas are undergoing larger changes because of development proposals. More regular reviews would be much better able to take such changes into account as development in those areas speeds up in the years ahead.

I want to touch on cost. A number of colleagues have discussed the cost-saving aspect of the existing legislation. While I do not believe that that should be the primary focus—that focus is to address the imbalance of representation between constituencies—it is clearly important. Reducing the cost of politics is, and still should be, an important factor. We have heard a number of figures—£12 million to £13 million a year saved just on pay, pensions and allowances alone, and £60 million to £66 million saved across the course of several Parliaments. This change should be part of the effort to reduce the cost of politics more generally. We have seen ministerial pay freezes in recent years, and some local councils have taken action to reduce the number of elected officials, too. My authority, South Gloucestershire Council, is leading the way by reducing the number of district councillors by over 10% in the next year. I want to put on record my appreciation for the work that Conservative-controlled South Gloucestershire Council and its leader, Matthew Riddle, have done to make reductions and save over £100,000 a year in council allowances alone.

As was touched on earlier, there would be associated costs if we abandoned the review at this point. So far there have been more than 500 hours of public hearings, involving more than 20 members of staff, 21 assistant commissioners and 14 videographers. There have been numerous public hearings across England. The cost of scrapping all that and redrawing the boundaries on the basis of this completely new proposal would presumably run into many millions of pounds. I have seen no estimate from Opposition Members of where the money would come from or what the final bill would be.

The Bill repeats a proposal from the previous Parliament that has the sole aim of simply pushing back our proposals so that the next general election, and presumably the one after that and so on, will be fought on the current boundaries—as we have heard, those boundaries are based on figures that are over 20 years out of date—which would be a genuine outrage. The review is being conducted by the Boundary Commission, which is a completely independent and impartial advisory body that prioritises compliance with legal requirements, not political considerations.

As I have pointed out, if the Bill progresses, we will be ensuring that our constituents are not equally represented in this place and that their voices are not equal. It would be a regressive step if the Bill were to proceed. The central point is that the votes of our constituents should carry equal weight, and if we do not have seats of broadly the same size, some constituents will in effect be disfranchised and will not have the same voice in this House.

Much was made at the start of the debate about trust, but it will not do anything to engender trust in politics, politicians and this place if Labour Members make a party political move by kicking the boundary changes into the long grass, because they are worried about fighting another election on the current boundaries, rather than allowing us to fulfil a commitment made in the last two Conservative manifestos. I say to them that if the answer is 50 more Members of Parliament, they are asking completely the wrong question.

11.56 am

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): I will try to ask the right question: why is the only measure that the Government are pushing to reform our disfigured electoral system one that will give them a numerical advantage? I should declare a vested interest, in that my constituency will disappear if the changes go through, and I do have a little regret at the fact that that will interrupt my promising parliamentary career just as I am beginning to get the hang of how this place works. However, that is not why I am making a speech.

It is revealing that the Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin), had to harp back to before 2010, when he became its Chair, to be able to cite an example of a useful reform. I have been on the Committee for three Parliaments, and I know
that the reputation of Parliament is as it was described by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan). That is the crucial point—it is what this debate is about. The few people who are not looking at the coverage of the royal couple in Nottingham this morning but are watching our soporific exchanges here might be surprised at our self-indulgence, but our reputation fell to rock bottom during the expenses scandal and it is now worse—it is subterranean—and that is what we should address.

We must address the weaknesses in our system. If we want every vote to count, we can do that through a system of proportional representation. We need a system that is fair and through which the views of the people are represented. In two Parliaments during my time in the House, the Conservative party won 20% of the vote in Wales but did not get a single one of the 40 seats for Wales, which is outrageous. If there was a PR system in the United States, we would have spared a President who behaves like a petulant child, and we would not have had to express our anger in the way we did yesterday. That shows the major weakness in the system.

Other scandals are certain to take place. What happened to the system for disciplining Ministers? Under the system set up by Gordon Brown, two Ministers were called in by the adviser on Ministers’ interests. There was someone in place to do such a job, in accordance with the ministerial code, but since the Conservative Government have taken over, that post has been subsumed into other roles, and people are judged not by the adviser whose job it is, but by civil servants and others.

As has happened in some cases, there is now a process of absolution by resignation. Two Ministers have resigned to conceal what they were accused of doing. One was accused of having meetings with Mossad outside his ministerial role, and another was accused of considering giving international aid money to the Israeli army. Those two people lost their jobs, but they were not disgraced in the way that they should have been if the public had been informed. We had the case of two Ministers giving £3 million to a charity that was favoured by the previous Prime Minister.

Michelle Donelan: I am a little concerned that we are getting off the important topic under discussion—I would like to get back to it. The hon. Gentleman said that he wants to make votes count much more. Does he concede that the equalisation of constituencies would do that?

Paul Flynn: I accept entirely the logic behind the Bill and its arithmetic—I am not arguing about that. I am saying only that a massive programme of reform is urgent and essential. I was making a point about the two Ministers who threw away £3 million by giving it to a dodgy charity that went broke three days later. They were never called to account by the Prime Minister, but that should have happened. We must reform that system. We must get reform in the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments as well. We have a system whereby Ministers, former generals and others can—

Mr Speaker: Order. It is very good of the hon. Gentleman to sit down when I rise to my feet. He is an extremely experienced and dextrous parliamentarian, and I was going to say to him, politely, that he has started his speech “broadly”—let me put it like that—and he cannot be accused of having attended too closely to the specifics of the measure before us. I feel sure that he will now apply his scholarly cranium with laser-like intensity to the matter before us, rather than to the matter that he might wish were before us.

Paul Flynn: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I greatly appreciate that advice, and I shall try to focus my laser-like cranium on the effect that these measures will have in Wales. The Welsh Assembly has PR, but it now has the problem that it does not have enough Members for its increasing workload. If the number of Welsh MPs is to be reduced—it is almost certain that that will happen sometime in the future—there must be a compensatory increase in numbers in the Welsh Assembly. That would make the proposals logical and fair, but at the moment they are a piece of special pleading by the Tory party cynically to increase the number of MPs that they have in Westminster. That has nothing to do with reform of our constitution, which is in a very bad state.

12.2 pm

Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn), with whom I served—albeit briefly—on the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee. As ever, I am afraid that I may disagree with him on a number of points, but I will come to that in a moment. I will also keep my remarks brief, because many of the points that I wish to raise have already been covered by previous speakers, in particular in the eloquent speech by my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) on introducing the Bill, and although I do not support it, it is important that Parliament has the opportunity to discuss its principles.

I have two particular concerns about the Bill. The first relates to the proposal that we should renege on the commitment that was voted through this House in the Parliament before last to reduce the number of Members of Parliament from 650 to 600, thereby cutting the cost of politics. My second concern is the idea that we should change the principle regarding the degree of variance that we have in the boundary review following that reduction in the number of MPs, because I think that would take us further away from the principle of equal votes having equal weight in terms of the number of MPs who are elected.

On the first principle, it is very important that we in this place seek to cut the cost of politics. It is worth recalling how this legislation came about in the first place. If Members cast their minds back, the context to all this was the expenses scandal. The hon. Member for Newport West rightly says that it knocked the public’s confidence in this place considerably. In response, the then Leader of the Opposition, the then Member for Witney, made a large number of proposals to reduce the cost of politics and to restore confidence in politics. In advance of this debate, I took the opportunity to re-read his speech from September 2009 entitled “Cutting the Cost of Politics.” It passes the test of time quite well—I
Oliver Dowden:

should declare an interest, as I had a very small role in one or two of the measures included in it—and made the point that we in this place, particularly at a time when the previous Labour Government had massively maxed out the country’s credit card and were in the process of giving us the largest budget deficit in our peacetime history, should seek to reduce public expenditure, including in this place.

The speech contained several good proposals in that regard. For example, it suggested: a 5% cut in Ministers’ salaries, which is what the new Government did when they came into power; a cut in the use of Government cars, which again they did when they came into power; and a cut in ministerial travel. I must say that with hindsight we perhaps went a little far on that last point. We now have the slightly extreme situation where some Ministers are required to travel economy on very long flights, only to be told that they are not allowed to read the contents of their boxes because they are travelling in economy. That does not necessarily serve the public interest. By and large, however, it contained a sensible package of measures that sought to restore trust in this place by cutting the cost of how it did business.

Mims Davies: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Councils up and down the country, including Hertsmere Borough Council which I represent, did a fantastic job of living within their means and cutting excessive expenditure.

Huw Merriman: As my hon. Friend was at the centre of power then—I am sure he will be again soon—I would be very interested to know why there was no proposal to cut the number of Ministers by 10%. I was struck by the arguments advanced by my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin).

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend before I move on to his substantive point. I am quite confident that as a Member of this place my role in national life has increased, not decreased. It is a great privilege to represent the people of Hertsmere in this place.

On my hon. Friend’s specific point, my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex makes an important point, which should be considered by the Prime Minister of the day should the legislation ever be put into effect—I very much hope it will. The Prime Minister will have some discretion. The legislation sets out a maximum number of Ministers, but it is my understanding that the Prime Minister does not have to take up the entire allocation. The Prime Minister of the day may wish to choose not to take up that allocation. I do not think that that is an argument of such strength that it means we should revisit the entire legislation at this point, because the benefits of proceeding with the existing legislation as it stands outweigh that.

It is worth noting that the speech I mentioned earlier also made the case, as part of cutting the cost of politics and restoring trust, for reducing the number of Members of Parliament. An interesting question, which was raised by the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), is how we actually came by the 600 figure, which some Members have suggested is somewhat arbitrary. I think that, in a sense, one number is as arbitrary as another, but the rationale at the time was a 10% cut in the number of Members of Parliament. Those who are good at maths will note that that takes us not from 650 to 600, but down to 585. However, as Members may recall, the then Leader of the Opposition did not succeed entirely in winning in the 2010 election, and was forced to enter into a coalition with the Liberal Democrats. As part of the negotiations on the proposals, the Liberal Democrats consistently argued for more Members of Parliament, while the Conservatives made the case for cutting the cost of politics and having fewer Members of Parliament. We met somewhere in the middle with 600, which at least had the benefit of being a round number.

Mims Davies: My hon. Friend has mentioned that the Liberal Democrats argued for more Members of Parliament as a result of the coalition. Sadly they are unable to advance that argument today, because they are not here.

Oliver Dowden: I had noted the absence of the Liberal Democrats, and I regret it, because I will make some further points about their role in our failure to deliver the reduction that we wanted. It would have been nice if they had had the opportunity to intervene and respond, but sadly they were unable to make it.

The reduction in the number of Members of Parliament was an important part of the package, because, as other Members have pointed out, it involved a reduction in the cost of this place—and a reduction from 650 to 600 will still save £66 million over a five-year Parliament. At a time when we have to make difficult decisions to ensure that we live within our means as a country and do not burden our children and grandchildren, we should not pass up any saving to the public purse, but the more fundamental point relates to trust.

We have delivered on every aspect of the programme to reduce the cost of politics except the measure that relates most directly to us in this place. I do not think that our constituents will look very kindly on us if we choose to reverse the legislation that we introduced during the 2010-15 Parliament, apparently for no other reason than, as some have suggested, the electoral advantage to Opposition Members. I urge Members to stick to what was originally agreed. It is a source of great regret to me that, because the Liberal Democrats effectively reneged on their promise, we did not manage to legislate for the boundary review during the last Parliament—and here we are again, not in the subsequent Parliament but in the one after that, refighting exactly the same battles and having the same debates all over again.

Wendy Morton: My hon. Friend is making a good case for reducing the cost of democracy by reducing the number of Members of Parliament. Does he agree that tackling the democratic deficit is at the heart of what we are trying to do? If we pass this Bill and kick other measures into touch, we will not be addressing that issue, and it is an issue that affects my constituents.
Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is my second, and principal, reason for disagreeing with the Bill, and I shall come to it very shortly.

The point about cutting the cost of politics has been made by many other Members, so I will not labour it, but the statistics are pretty clear. With 600 Members, we will still be relatively over-represented in terms of the number of MPs per capita in comparison with most comparable countries. I do not think that we will be selling our constituents short in terms of our capacity to represent them. I am sure that I am perfectly capable of representing 10,000 more constituents, and I hope that most other Members of Parliament are as well.

The second argument, which in a way is more powerful, is that we also need to ensure that we have equal weight for equal votes. This argument goes back not years or decades, but centuries, as has been noted—back to the Chartists. The Bill proposes to increase the degree of permitted variance from the current 5%; although it is welcome that the proposal is now to increase it to 7.5%, rather than the original 10%, that still allows up to a 15% variation in the size of constituencies, which means a Member in one constituency will have to work that much harder, as it were, because more people will have to vote for them than in another comparable constituency. There is an inherent unfairness in that.

The contrary argument for why we should have this greater degree of variance was made by the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew), and it is that there is often a geographical link between areas that should be respected. This argument has been used many times to justify not changing the boundaries; indeed, it was used to say we should stick within county boundaries. It does not have any salience at all with the general public and the people who elect us, however.

The House of Commons Library has produced a very helpful note on my constituency of Hertsmere, setting out how the boundaries have changed over the decades and centuries. The constituency has at times encompassed Enfield, Barnet, Watford and South Hertfordshire. That has not made any significant difference to the representation that their residents have from their MP.

My constituency currently encompasses a wide range of different places, from areas closely linked to Watford such as Bushy, to Borehamwood, which is a town, and very small villages that still feel as though they are many hundreds of miles from London even though they are but 12 miles away—beautiful, idyllic little English villages such as Letchmore Heath, Aldenham and Ridge. There is, therefore, a combination of urban and rural. Indeed, I represent Aldenham East, the most prosperous ward in the entire country, which sits cheek by jowl with Cowley Hill, one of the poorest wards in the country. As has been noted many times in this debate, it is incumbent upon MPs to represent their constituencies as they stand, and I think all MPs are capable of doing that. It rather demeans the role of MPs to say they are not capable of representing very diverse constituencies that look in lots of different directions, as my own constituency does. So I am not persuaded by that argument.

The argument I am very persuaded by was made by the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) and is about trust in politics. The boundary proposals will contribute to restoring trust in politics. First, they will reduce the cost of politics so our constituents pay less for us to be in this place. They will also restore trust in politics by sticking by something that was already agreed by this House in the Parliament before last, and not seeking to overturn it because doing so meets the temporary electoral interests of certain parts of this House. I therefore urge Members not to support this Bill, and instead to stick by what was agreed in the 2010 Parliament.

12.19 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): As a new Member of the House, this is the first time I have taken part in a private Member’s Bill Friday. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) is suggesting that I take the full three hours available, but I will not do so, having sat through the last almost three hours with some Members waffling on for the best part of 50 minutes. If we were to talk about the current state of politics, I might start—My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South is right: the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), who spoke for 50 minutes, has left the Chamber. Perhaps he is away talking to himself in the mirror.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) on bringing forward the Bill. It is notable that he has had a meteoric rise as part of the class of 2017. He has been fortunate in the ballot for private Members’ Bills, and he is now on the shadow Front Bench. That is almost as meteoric as my rise to the position of deputy assistant junior Whip for the Scottish National party. I do not intend to speak for very long, but I want to say that we in the SNP believe that the UK Government should abandon their plan to cut the number of MPs, particularly in Scotland, where the proposal to cut 10% of Members is absolutely unacceptable. I want to take a few minutes to talk about the other place along the corridor—the “ermine vermin”.

Also, we need to think not necessarily about cutting the cost of politics but about the Government’s proposal to cut the cost of scrutiny. I also want to talk about EU scrutiny and about the proposed unfeasibly large seats. I will finish by referencing some of the provisions in the Bill.

We are in the rather bizarre position of having a House of Lords with more than 800 Members. I believe that it is second in size only to China’s National People’s Congress, which is absolutely ridiculous. It is the only legislature other than that of Iran in which members of the clergy are allowed to legislate: it has 24 bishops, temporal and spiritual. Other than Lesotho, it is the only legislature that has hereditary chieftains, in the form of its 92 hereditary peers. That makes an absolute mockery of the place. Even more scandalous is the fact that Members of the House of Lords clock in, get their tax-free £300 a day, and then leave. My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) is looking at ways of tracking how often they are actually in the building. There has certainly been evidence in the past that they turn up and then leave again within a few minutes, which is totally unacceptable. Also, if the proposed changes went through, we would find ourselves in the bizarre situation of having more Members of the House of peers with a Scottish address than elected Members of Parliament for Scotland.
[David Linden]

Under the leadership of David Cameron, the Government appointed 126 Conservative Members of the House of Lords, 56 Labour Members, 51 Liberal Democrats and 31 independent and Cross-Bench peers. Conservative Members in this place spend a huge amount of time telling us about cutting the cost of politics, yet they are quite happy to condone appointments such as those. I do not see anyone trying to intervene on me at this stage, so perhaps they understand that this is a pretty daft situation.

Oliver Dowden: As the hon. Gentleman is seeking an intervention, perhaps he would like to note that the cost of the House of Lords has actually fallen, not risen, since 2010, so the cost of politics is being cut in relation to the upper Chamber.

David Linden: The point is that if we continue on the current trajectory of appointing Lords, we will have more than 1,000 Members in the other place, so I think that that falls on its feet.

I also want to touch on the question of EU scrutiny. As we leave the European Union, we are going to lose 73 Members of the European Parliament. That will mean a lot of EU legislation coming back to London. I hope the Government will resist the temptation to execute a power grab, and instead put those powers on to Edinburgh and Wales. Under the Government’s proposals, however, there would be fewer MPs to scrutinise all that legislation. During the referendum campaign, I remember leavers telling us that 75% of our legislation was made in Brussels. If all that legislation is coming back to this place, we will need to scrutinise it, yet there will be fewer Members of Parliament to do so. That makes a mockery of the argument that we are taking back control. Where is the parliamentary sovereignty there? Hon. Members have already touched on the question of the payroll vote. The combined number of Parliamentary Private Secretaries and Ministers accounts for 22% of this legislature, but I see no proposals from the Government to reduce their numbers.

I also want to talk about the proposals for some unfeasibly large seats following the boundary changes. My group leader, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) already has seven islands in his constituency. Bizarrely, the proposed new seat of Argyll, Bute and Lochaber would have 30 inhabited islands. I was speaking to the current member for Argyll and Bute, my hon. Friend, the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara), yesterday. He told me that if he turned left from his house and went towards Glasgow airport, he could get to Canada more quickly than he could get to Canna in the proposed new constituency. That is ludicrous. The proposed new Highland South constituency would be the size of Cyprus. I do not know whether parliamentary allowances would allow a new Member to have a helicopter to get around that constituency, which would be five times the size of Luxembourg. Charles Kennedy, who sadly passed away, said that *having represented three such vast constituencies over the course of nearly 30 years now, I can say that the current one is by far the most impractical. It has to be said that the other two were gigantic and posed particular problems, but there comes a point at which geographical impracticality sets in and nobody can do the job of local parliamentary representation effectively.*—[Official Report, 1 November 2010; Vol. 517, c. 661.] Charles Kennedy was a very wise man, and I think we should listen to it.

I do not want to filibuster on this Bill, as some Government Members may have done, so I will finish up by making reference to its provisions. We certainly welcome the relaxation of requirements so that the electorate per constituency has to be to within 7.5% of the electoral quota to preserve local representation. However, I am concerned that the Bill contains a provision for a fixed number of MPs for Northern Ireland but not for Scotland, so I hope that the Bill will have its Second Reading today and will be taken into Committee, where I will be seeking an amendment to remedy that.

I hope that Government Members do not reject this Bill’s Second Reading, and I commend the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton for bringing the Bill to the House.

12.36 pm

Rishi Sunak (Richmond (Yorks)) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) on securing this Second Reading debate. It is a privilege to follow so many wise and learned contributions, especially that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper). I disagree slightly with the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), because I was hanging off almost every word of my right hon. Friend’s tour de force, which drew upon his great experience of taking a similar Bill through Parliament. My hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) also brought considerable experience and thought to this matter, and his contribution gave me much pause for thought.

My predecessor in this House, Lord Hague, once told many of his constituents just how uniquely our particular form of parliamentary democracy was seen by his many international counterparts. He described how, after a high-level summit, the G20 leaders could scarcely believe that the Foreign Secretary of the United Kingdom had to depart their supper to get on a plane and fly back to his rural north Yorkshire constituency to hold a surgery for Hawes. He explained that “Hawes” was not what they had thought and that it was in fact a rural town in Wensleydale with a small population of 1,000 people. Hilary Clinton, the US Secretary of State at the time, was shocked that senior members of the UK Government had space in their diaries for such an amazing activity on a Friday. The people from countries with proportional representation could not quite fathom the concept of a constituency, and some of the more aloof dignitaries present wondered why on earth he was meeting any members of the public in the first place.

That brief story illustrates the enduring strength of our parliamentary democracy and, in particular, the close connection to our constituents that all Members of this House are privileged to have. Ours is a robust system, underpinned by centuries of tradition and custom. Our electoral system is precious, and any changes to it must therefore be considered extremely carefully. Having spent a little time considering it, I believe that the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011 made some sensible and overdue changes to that system. In discussing potential changes to that Act, I will confine my remarks to three simple points.
First, there is a strong, unarguable case for the equalisation of the number of electors. Secondly, I will turn to why I believe that modestly reducing the number of Members of this House to 600 is, on balance, sensible. Finally, I will take this opportunity to discuss my experience of the ongoing boundary review, with particular regard to one village in my constituency: Great Ayton.

Turning to the case for equalisation, as the former Deputy Prime Minister and Member for Sheffield, Hallam once put it, it is a patently obvious principle that each person’s vote should carry the same weight. The principle was similarly endorsed by the independent Committee on Standards in Public Life.

Today we find ourselves in a situation where the largest constituency has more than 93,000 electors, compared with just over 40,000 in the smallest. It cannot be fair that constituencies vary in size by as much as 100%. The outcome is that a vote in a constituency like that of my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) counts for half as much as a vote in a constituency like Arfon. Requiring constituencies to be within a narrow band of 5% of the average quota is sensible, reasonable and very fair.

Some have claimed that these adjustments are, in some way, political gerrymandering, that the Conservative party or the Government are redrawing the boundaries, but nothing could be further from the truth. These reforms are being led by the different boundary commissions of the United Kingdom. Independent bodies, the boundary commissions have always carried out their role with due diligence and impartiality. I have every confidence in the boundary commissions and their well-established independence. I am yet to hear any evidence to the contrary.

It would, in any case, be unwise to interpret any particular short-term advantage that might accrue to any particular party as fixed and immutable. Interestingly, when looking at elections by the number of people who changed their vote—a measure of electoral volatility—the last two elections, in 2015 and 2017, were the most volatile since the elections at the time of the great depression and immediately after world war one. That shows we live in an age when no party can lazily count on the fixed support of the British people. I am confident that the small changes to our boundaries and to our system will in no way stop the British people expressing their strongly held views about which party they want to represent them in government.

On the more nuanced issue of the appropriate size of this House, I acknowledge the concerns raised by Members on both sides of the House about modestly reducing the number of MPs to 600. The speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex gave many of us pause for thought and some ideas to consider. He called for a decrease in the number of Ministers to 600 Members. It was with interest that I noted the constituency of Richmond (Victoria Prentis) counts for half as much as a vote in a constituency like Arfon. Requiring constituencies to be within a narrow band of 5% of the average quota is sensible, reasonable and very fair.

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[Rishi Sunak] 

public money is tight it is eminently reasonable that politics should not be immune from our efforts to bring the nation’s finances back under control.

David Linden: It is a bit ironic that the hon. Gentleman is talking about how the public purse is under huge strain; I look at the Benches where the Democratic Unionist party would be. Does not what the Government did by bribing the DUP with £1 billion in the confidence and supply agreement relate to exactly that point?

Rishi Sunak: On representation, I feel pretty good that the Conservative Benches are lined with colleagues participating today, unlike the Opposition Benches. The hon. Gentleman talks a lot about money for the DUP, but that is deeply insulting to the people of Northern Ireland, who are receiving any money that the UK Government are spending on regions—Scotland, Wales and Yorkshire also receive funding. When we talk about money going to the regions from this Parliament, it is going to the people of those areas, not their politicians.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Oliver Dowden) defended well how this measure will cut the cost of politics, and we would do well to heed that. Of course we do not want to see any weakening of that fundamental link between MPs and their constituents, but I do not think that increasing the size of constituencies by 10%, as the original 2011 Act does, will in any way undermine that strong connection we have today.

Thirdly, I should say that this is not just about the number of constituencies, but about where we draw the lines, so the last point I wish to make is about how the boundary review affects my constituency. Constituency boundaries must reflect the way people live their lives. Ordnance Survey maps, detailed as they are, cannot always capture the close bonds of community that have been forged between towns and villages over centuries. The village of Great Ayton, the boyhood home of Captain Cook, has been an integral part of my constituency for more than a century, taking part in the election of Richmond’s MPs in as many as 27 general elections in that time. So it is not difficult to imagine the shock of local people when the Boundary Commission originally recommended that they be transferred to the neighbouring constituency of Thirsk and Malton. In no way was that a reflection on the excellent work that my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Christopher Davies) and congratulated him on introducing the Bill.

The constituencies created by this methodology are more of a random mishmash of voters than actual constituencies. My own constituency of Aberavon has certainly been a victim of this arbitrary and poorly designed gerrymander. Initially, the boundary review proposals brutally cut in two the town at the heart of my constituency, Port Talbot. The high street was cut off from the main shopping centre and the steelworks was cut off from Sandfields, the housing estate built for its workers.

Fortunately, the Boundary Commission for Wales saw sense and reunited the communities in its revised proposals. Unfortunately, the upshot was that the Afan valley and its communities of Bryn, Cwmavon, Cymer, Glyncorrwg and Gwymf were separated from Port Talbot and put in the neighbouring constituency of Neath. For anyone who knows the reality of life in our part of the world, this is a clear example of cobbling together a mishmash of voters instead of building on natural communities with shared interests.

As unacceptable as the initial proposals were to my constituents, the suggestion that the Afan valley be cut off from the rest of my constituency is equally bizarre and insulting to the culture and heritage of our people. There is a natural affinity between the communities of the Afan valley and Port Talbot. To disregard that would be to ignore the community links, leaving them isolated from their natural home, and lumped into a constituency where they would feel sidelined. The case of Aberavon illustrates why the broader terms of the boundary review are impractical and should be abandoned. Wherever we draw the line on the map, using the existing criteria we

by the number of constituents who wrote to me to express their concern. It is no wonder that the Boundary Commission noted that it had received significant opposition to its proposals. Along with broad cross-party agreement that those proposals were flawed, the commission was inundated with submissions and public meetings were packed with people coming to express their point of view.

I was delighted when the Boundary Commission accepted the case that retaining Great Ayton was compelling. The wonderful part of the country that I have the privilege to represent will remain intact. For me, this was a positive experience of the Boundary Commission doing its job diligently and constructively. It listened, engaged and did its utmost to accommodate a community’s wishes and I remain grateful to it.

I remain in support of the original 2011 Act. Constituencies with an equal number of electors are a fundamental democratic principle and a reform long overdue. Reducing the number of MPs will cut the cost of politics without endangering the critical scrutiny or constituency link that Parliament provides. Lastly, in making the changes, we should be mindful of the individual character of constituencies and encourage the Boundary Commission to listen and adjust its proposals when they do not match the reality on the ground. We are fortunate to have the electoral system that we do, and I am sure that it will continue to serve us well for generations to come.

12.42 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) and congratulate him on introducing the Bill.

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carve up communities and force unnatural alliances between very different communities to create a new constituency. Far from being more democratic, it risks alienating millions of people from the democratic process and leaving them without a voice in our political system. Wales, of course, will be particularly hard hit by the review, losing 11 of its 40 MPs, and at a time when the impact of Brexit will probably fall hardest on our part of the world and when the need for the strongest-possible voice in this place could not be greater.

Six hundred is an entirely arbitrary number. Given the House’s increased workload after Brexit, it is absolutely clear that the number of MPs should remain at 650. MPs should represent broadly equal numbers of voters, but this should not come at the expense of local community cohesion. Greater flexibility is needed, therefore, in the review process to allow for constituencies to be more equal in size and for the disparity in size between some of the smallest and some of the biggest constituencies to be reduced. This process must, however, above all recognise the need for local community cohesion and representation and recognise the ties that bind our people and the importance of the link between our people and our MPs. That should be the driving purpose of the review, as opposed to the bare-faced gerrymander the Government are attempting to force through.

12.46 pm

Victoria Prentis: It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), who clearly cares deeply about the needs of his constituents, though I disagree fundamentally about the purpose of the 2011 Act, which rejigged the boundary system. I must take issue with my right hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), who is in his place on the Front Bench, and my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) were elected to the House. Between them, they inherited the constituencies my father had represented for two and a half decades.

My own constituency was created in 1553—I am looking at my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin)—during the reign of Mary Tudor. When visitors come to Parliament and are shown the beautiful stained glass in St Stephen’s Hall, they can find the arms of some of the oldest parliamentary cities and boroughs, and if they look carefully, they see that Banbury is there. Just as we are one of the oldest constituencies, we are also, as several hon. Friends have said, one of the largest, with over 90,000 people on our electoral roll—almost 20,000 more than the constituency of the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan).

My right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) made some very flattering comments earlier about my ability to represent my constituents, and he also made the point that we are growing locally at an unprecedented rate. As a national leader in house building, we have 23,000 new homes planned in the next decade. We are building houses at the rate of three a day, and these are often not one-bedroom properties but long-term houses for families, with three, four or five bedrooms and with plenty of space for families to grow. Yet, as every new resident registers on my electoral roll, their vote is, effectively, diminished. The vote of Mrs Clark, Mrs Wood or Mrs Smith in Glasgow North is worth almost twice as much as Mrs Clark’s vote in Banbury.

The idea of equalising the number of constituents predates all of us in this House. The Chartists first suggested it in the people’s charter of 1838, and it is important to read what the charter said. Point 5 of the Chartists demands—[Interruption.] This is a working-class movement for political reform—Opposition Members might want to listen. Point 5 refers to equal constituencies, securing the same amount of representation for the same number of electors, instead of allowing less populous constituencies to have as much or more weight than larger ones.

Andrew Gwynne: The hon. Lady will know that the Chartists also called for annual elections, so are we having one next year?

Victoria Prentis: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and I sincerely hope we will not be having an election next year; I think we have had enough for now.

James Cartlidge: Surely the key point my hon. Friend is making is that, whereas the Labour party is seeking to defend the status quo, Conservative Members are the radicals and the reformers.

Victoria Prentis: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, and he makes the point I was going on to make: while we do not, of course, agree with everything in the people’s charter—for example, it provides only...
for votes for men, and Conservative Members are passionately in favour of votes for women—we do adopt the more far-reaching ideas in it, and we believe very firmly that votes must count equally.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Victoria Prentis: I think I had better make progress for a minute.

The independent Committee on Standards in Public Life also endorsed the idea of fairness of votes for our constituents in 2007. One vote, one value must be a vital democratic principle. To make that happen, boundary reform was a key pledge in the manifesto on which I stood in 2015 and again in 2017. The Boundary Commission is already well on its way to making that a reality. It has been working hard on drawing up proposals, consulting, analysing responses and revising its plans. My own association, like that of my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak), has taken considerable time and effort to engage with the Boundary Commission’s recommendations, to gauge the thoughts of constituents and to draw up responses.

While my constituency, under the new proposals, will remain one of the largest in the country—I think it will still be the fourth largest—I will lose a chunk of my electorate as it drops to 78,250. Just as a parent loves all their children equally, I of course love all the areas I represent equally—I would be sad to lose any of them. I could no more choose between Hook Norton and Finmere than I could between my daughters, but my belief in democracy is stronger. Ensuring fair representation and that a vote in north Oxfordshire counts the same as it does anywhere else is extremely important to me.

Huw Merriman: I would choose Hook Norton over Finmere as Hook Norton has a fantastic brewery, although Finmere is nearer to my family home.

Mr Speaker: I am most interested in the autobiographical details of the hon. Gentleman, with which I was personally familiar, not least on account of the whereabouts of members of his family—my illustrious constituents—but other Members are not so fortunate.

Victoria Prentis: I, too, am very aware of the whereabouts of members of my hon. Friend’s family, but I am also aware of the marvellous brewery in Hook Norton, which I am ever proud to represent and from which so many hon. Members are pleased to buy wares from time to time. Christmas is coming and it is doing a very good pack.

Given the pace of change in my own area, I have considerable sympathy for the suggestion made by many hon. Members that we should use more recent data. Unless we have a defined date, which we do not, and a set of electoral registers to assess, there is no right or wrong time to do this. The excellent Library briefing observes:

“Whatever data Parliament directs the Commission to use, there will always be a latency between the data used for a review and the boundaries that come out of a review being implemented.”

If we agree to move the goalposts today, what is there to stop another Member coming along in two years’ time and changing things again? The Boundary Commission is an independent and impartial advisory body that prioritises compliance within legal requirements, not political considerations. In my view, we must let it get on with the job.

Mr Nicholas Brown (Newcastle upon Tyne East) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36.)

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.

The House divided: Ayes 229, Noes 44.

Division No. 52] [12.56 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Alexander, Heidi
Alin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniazzia, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Barron, r Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Bone, Mr Peter
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carden, Dan
Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Coaker, Vernon
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvonne
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Sir David
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Davies, Philip
De Cordova, Marsha
De Piero, Gloria
Dent Coad, Emma
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Olive
Elliott, Julie
Elnman, Mrs Louise
Elmore, Chris
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frith, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hardy, Emma
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Mr Mark
Hendry, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Dan
Question accordingly agreed to.

Question put accordingly, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time; to stand committed to a Public Bill Committee (Standing Order No. 63.)
Points of Order

1.9 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You will have seen that the board of NHS England met yesterday to consider the latest budget settlement for the national health service. It concluded that the underfunding of the NHS now means that it will not be able to continue the 18-week target for treatment. That will mean our constituents waiting longer and longer in pain and distress for operations, and it is also in conflict with the NHS constitution, which is enshrined in statute that was passed by this House. Given the gravity of that decision, can you tell us whether the Health Secretary has given you any indication that he intends to come to the House to explain why our constituents will have to wait longer for elective operations?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order, in response to which the answer is no. I have received no indication of any intention by the Secretary of State or another Health Minister to come to the House to make a statement on that matter. The Departments are responsible for the day-to-day management of the NHS, and it is not appropriate for this House to determine how responsibilities are divided among Ministers and which Department should answer a particular question. I am therefore afraid that any attempt to thwart her would have been thwarted.

Nevertheless, in so far as the hon. Gentleman is genuinely seeking advice—I think that, to an extent, he is—my response is as follows. I appreciate that it is generally seeking advice—I think that, to an extent, he might be able to use his ingenuity to find an orderly way to raise his concerns at Question Time on Monday. It would not be appropriate for me to reinstate the transferred oral. I am advised that the hon. Gentleman might be able to use his ingenuity to find an orderly way to raise his concerns at Question Time on Monday. It will, of course, be open to him to seek to do so, if he is speaking from the Opposition Front Bench, and the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) may, for example—I speak hypothetically—seek to air her concerns at topical questions. If she seeks to catch my eye, she may be successful, and if she were successful, any attempt to thwart her would have been thwarted.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This is the first point of order I have made, but I was so taken aback by this that I felt I should do so. The hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) referred to peers as vermin in ermine, and I have confirmed that the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) referred to this place with basic courtesy. In referring to Members of the other place, it is not appropriate to make that comparison or to draw that analogy. We will leave it there for now.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order and for his courtesy in giving me advance notice of his intention to raise it. It was at least in part—I say this in a non-pejorative sense—a rhetorical inquiry. I think that I can say safely, without fear of contradiction—again, non-pejoratively—that he was, on the whole, more interested in what he had to say to me than in anything that I might have to say to him.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) was drawn at Question 4 for Monday’s Communities and Local Government questions. Her question was to ask what recent assessment the Secretary of State had made of the effect of changes in local mental health responsibilities. What can we do to ensure that that oral question is reinstated so that CLG Ministers can be held to account for what is happening in local government in respect of children’s mental health?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order and for his courtesy in giving me advance notice of his intention to raise it. It was at least in part—I say this in a non-pejorative sense—a rhetorical inquiry. I think that I can say safely, without fear of contradiction—again, non-pejoratively—that he was, on the whole, more interested in what he had to say to me than in anything that I might have to say to him.

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Mr Speaker: The short answer to the hon. Gentleman is that it most certainly was unbecoming of this place and of the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden). It was said—as far as I can imagine, because I did not hear it—sotto voce. If it was muttered inaudibly by accident I am, frankly, surprised, because in the short time that the hon. Gentleman has been a Member of this place, I have always thought him a articulate fellow who speaks lucidly in terms that are readily audible and intelligible. If, on the other hand, it was a deliberate ruse to blurt these words out in a manner intended not to be heard, but nevertheless to be incorporated in the Official Report, that is unworthy of somebody with the budding aspirations and potential stature of the hon. Gentleman. I hope he will not resort to such a tactic again. We should, seriously, treat each other in this place with basic courtesy. In referring to Members of the other place, it is not appropriate to make that comparison or to draw that analogy. We will leave it there for now.
Prisons (Interference with Wireless Telegraphy) Bill

Second Reading

1.17 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I am sure that many Members have already noticed that the Bill is in not my name, but that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Ms McVey). It is a huge honour to take over the Bill from my right hon. Friend following her recent and richly deserved promotion to the Government. I am very grateful to her for having brought this important Bill before the House and for entrusting its further safe passage to me.

The purpose of the Bill is to make our prisons safer and more secure. It would amend the Prisons (Interference with Wireless Telegraphy) Act 2012, which was guided through Parliament and brought to the statute book by my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford). I am very happy to have an opportunity to build on his previous work.

Let me start with the problem that the Bill is intended to tackle: the presence of mobile phones in our prisons. These illicit phones cause significant harm both inside and outside our prisons, where they are used to co-ordinate the smuggling of drugs and other contraband. Mobile phones are key enablers of the illicit economy in our prisons, which drives a significant amount of violence and self-harm. They also have an impact outside the prison walls. They can often be used to harass victims and witnesses, or to run organised crime gangs outside prison. The high price that mobile phones command in our prisons funds the organised criminals who supply them to carry out other illegal activities.

The 2012 Act recognised the significance of the threat and provided the Secretary of State with the power to authorise governors to interfere with wireless telegraphy in their prisons. Using this authority, governors are currently empowered to carry out interference to prevent, detect or investigate the use of devices capable of transmitting or receiving images, sounds or information by electronic communication such as mobile phones.

Despite the authority provided in the 2012 Act and the considerable use that has been made of its powers, mobile phones continue to cause real and severe problems in prisons throughout the country. In particular, prisons continue to face the challenges posed by the increasing availability of mobile devices. Although governors have been authorised under the Act to interfere with wireless phone signals to combat the use of illicit mobile phones, and although seizure figures show how effective they have been in using the detection equipment available to them, the sheer number of seizures demonstrates that the Act needs to be expanded.

Hard-working prison staff make every effort to detect and confiscate illicit mobile phones and SIM cards, but the figures illustrate the scale of the problem. Only last year, 20,000 phones and SIM cards were found in prisons in England and Wales—approximately 54 each day. That is a significant increase on previous years, with just under 17,000 found in 2015, 10,000 in 2014, and just over 7,000 in 2013. Having met prison officers in my local prison in Lewes and heard at first hand about the problems that mobile phones cause them, I believe that the Bill will significantly improve safety and make their jobs easier.

It is clear that the current ban on mobile phones in prisons is not working, and that the 2012 Act needs to be expanded to combat the increasing problem. The Bill will build on the Act by allowing the Secretary of State to directly authorise public communication providers and mobile phone operators to interfere with wireless telegraphy in prisons, as is set out in clause 1. As a result of the 2012 Act, mobile network operators are already involved in work to combat illicit phones, but because the authority to carry out interference lies with individual governors, the role of the mobile phone operators has so far been limited. Clause 1 provides both the authority and a clear line of accountability in primary legislation for mobile phone network operators to become more actively involved in combating the problem. It is of course important to ensure that such activity is subject to safeguards that are needed to prevent inappropriate use. To that end, further consequential changes are made in the schedule to the Bill, which amends sections 2, 3 and 4 of the 2012 Act.

The schedule amends section 2 of the 2012 Act so that safeguards that already apply to authorised governors will also apply to authorised public communications providers. Like an authorised governor, any authorised public communications provider will have to comply with directions from the Secretary of State which must specify descriptions of the information with which governors are to be provided, the intervals at which it is to be provided, and the circumstances in which the use of equipment authorised for the purposes of interference with a wireless signal must be modified or discontinued. There will also be directions aimed at ensuring that authorised interference does not result in disproportionate interference with wireless technology outside prisons.

Section 3 of the Act governs retention and disclosure of information obtained by means of interference. It provides that information must be destroyed after three months unless the governor of a prison authorises its retention on specific grounds. When the information is retained, the governor must review its retention every three months, and must destroy it if its retention is no longer justified. Under the Bill, responsibility for deciding about retention and disclosure will still rest with the governor of the relevant institution, but because relevant information may now be obtained by a mobile phone operator or public communications provider, who may have been authorised in respect of multiple institutions, the Bill amends section 3 to clarify which governor is responsible for decisions about retention and disclosure in such cases.

The House had an opportunity to consider similar provisions to those in the Bill during its scrutiny of the Prisons and Courts Bill in the last Parliament. I am pleased to say there was genuine cross-party support for the measures, but two concerns were raised. The first was about prisoners accessing legitimate telephone services to retain contact with family members, friends and their communities outside prison. Multiple pieces of research, including the Farmer review, show that maintaining contact between prisoners and family members is crucial. Ministry of Justice research shows that prisoners who maintain contact with a family member are 39% less likely to reoffend than those who cannot. It is therefore
crucial that we enable that to happen, and some Members have stressed that mobile phones are a tool to maintain that contact.

While being able to contact family members using legitimate telephone services while in prison is key, the Ministry of Justice already has a programme of work under way to ensure that prisoners have access to legitimate phone services and do not need to turn to mobile phones. The Department is trialling in-cell handsets and calls tariff reductions in the prison estate, starting at HMP Wayland, and the ongoing trials aim to test the impact of this technology further. Conservative Members have already lobbied the Minister about this important issue through “A Manifesto to Strengthen Families”, and if I was not confident about this work, I would not be recommending the Bill.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech on this important Bill. I have constituents who work for Winchester prison. While they stress the need for family connections, they also have grave concerns about connectivity through illicit mobile phones. The Bill can address both of those points.

Maria Caulfield: Absolutely. Existing legislation bans mobile phones, so prisoners should not be accessing them to contact their family. That is not to say that contacting and keeping in touch with family members is not important; it is crucial both for inmates’ welfare and to reduce reoffending.

The second concern raised previously was about the possibility of interference activity in prisons having a detrimental effect on properties close to prisons, perhaps by blocking legitimate signals completely. My constituents in Lewes are worried about this. Under the powers of the 2012 Act, there was a small risk that genuine customers could be disconnected if their phones were incorrectly identified as being used in a prison without authorisation. To counter that, under this Bill, before any system is identified as being used in a prison without authorisation.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does she agree that even those of us who do not have prisons in our constituencies understand that people who have been locked away to protect the public should not be able to communicate with their former criminal associates in our constituencies?

The main aim of the Bill is to authorise public communications providers to disrupt the use of unlawful mobile phones in prisons. When I was reading the background papers for the Bill, I was interested to note that in 2016, approximately 13,000 mobile phones and 7,000 SIM cards were found in our prisons. The number of phones represented an increase from 7,000 in 2013. Those shockingly high numbers are a further indication of why the Bill is so important. I hope that it will make it easier for the governors of our prisons to tackle this problem. It is a way for us to show that we are on their side.

The illicit use of mobile phones undermines the safety and security of our prisons and enables criminals to access the internet. It is unacceptable that criminals should be able to continue to direct illegal activity from behind bars. The Bill will create a new power for the Secretary of State to authorise public communications providers to interfere with wireless telegraphy in prisons in England and Wales, in addition to the existing authority that can be given to governors.

I hope that Members will support this important Bill and the contribution it can make to improving the safety and security of our prisons. I commend it to the House.

1.29 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): It is an absolute pleasure to speak here today in support of the private Member’s Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield). She has clearly done a tremendous amount of work, on top of the preparations and foundations that had been laid by the right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Ms McVey), who first presented the Bill to the House. As someone who has taken two private Members’ Bills through this place—my aim is to make it a hat trick, but who knows? It is all down to the ballot—I really appreciate how much hard work my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes has put into getting the Bill this far. I sincerely wish it a safe and secure passage through its remaining stages here and in the other place, so that it can take its rightful place on the statute book.

My hon. Friend has a prison in her constituency, and she therefore brings a huge amount of experience and knowledge to the debate. I cannot bring any such experience, but I know that my constituents are very interested in the Bill, as I am sure all our constituents are. The fact that this topic has frequently been raised at Home Office questions is a further indication not only of the fact that the Government take the issue seriously but of the interest in it from Back Benchers and from our constituents.

Wendy Morton: My hon. Friend makes a valid and pertinent point. People who go to prison should not have the connections and privileges that those of us in the outside world enjoy. I know that a lot of my constituents would take that point on board as well.

The main aim of the Bill is to authorise public communications providers to disrupt the use of unlawful mobile phones in prisons. When I was reading the background papers for the Bill, I was interested to note that in 2016, approximately 13,000 mobile phones and 7,000 SIM cards were found in our prisons. The number of phones represented an increase from 7,000 in 2013. Those shockingly high numbers are a further indication of why the Bill is so important. I hope that it will make it easier for the governors of our prisons to tackle this problem. It is a way for us to show that we are on their side.

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Mims Davies: The Serious Crime Act 2015, introduced by this Government, which created the new offence of coercive behaviour, has been transformative for people in threatening and difficult relationships. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Bill could also help to manage those difficult situations that do not seem to stop when one party goes to prison?

Wendy Morton: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. What we are trying to do here is tackle the problem while keeping a focus on what prison is all about. It is about trying to reduce reoffending, and about rehabilitation.

A number of years ago, I visited an organisation in the north of England and met one of its pastoral workers. He explained to me how some individuals seemed to go through a revolving door, in that they would go into prison, come out, reoffend and go back in. It is not right for those individuals to be caught up in that sort of lifestyle, nor is it good for others in prison. Importantly, it is also not good for our communities, so my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) makes an important point. It is worth remembering that almost half of all prisoners are reconstructed within a year of release, and the cost to society of reoffending by former prisoners is estimated to be up to a staggering £15 billion a year, so this Bill is vital.

I had intended to ask the following question of my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes, but I failed to intervene, so perhaps she or the Minister will clarify this later. Will the Bill create an extra burden on prison governors? My understanding is that it will not and that it will actually make their job a lot easier, but it is important to get clarity on that for those listening to the debate.

If we can take this Bill through Parliament and if we can transfer powers to public communications providers, that will enable us, the Prison Service and prison governors to stay a little more ahead of the curve or at least keep close to it. We all know how quickly mobile technology, and technology in general, can change, and we so often hear how quickly new powers that we have legislated for can become out of date because those who seek to do us harm are one step ahead of us. I therefore hope that the Bill will go some way towards addressing that.

Kevin Foster: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Bill’s key purpose is to shift powers to the providers? Ultimately, it is the providers that have the technology and the teams of skilled people. The Bill also is about them ensuring that their networks are not being used to continue criminal activity by those behind bars, from whom the public should be protected.

Wendy Morton: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for reminding me of that. The Bill will hopefully give the initiative to those who are at the heart of technological advancements so that we do not have to legislate again if we are behind the curve after six months or a year. This is about the Government working in partnership with prisons, governors, the Home Office and providers. If we can get it right, that has to be the way that we continue to move forward. [ Interruption. ] My right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton is nodding. I appreciate that she cannot contribute to the debate, but it is so good that she is here and lending her continued support to my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes.

I want to touch on one or two other points about mobile phone use in prisons, which is often raised in the Chamber. If I check my record, I think I will find that I have asked questions about it. As Mr Speaker knows, I frequently ask questions on various topics that affect my constituents and my constituency—as he would of course expect. The Government have made it clear that the illicit use of mobile phones undermines the safety and security of prisons and enables criminals to access the internet, which should not be the case. In addition to the Bill, other action is being taken to tackle the issue of mobile phones in prisons because the number of devices seized continues to be high, as I said earlier.

Some £2 million has been invested in detection equipment, including handheld detectors and portable detection devices. Every prison in England and Wales—I sadly note that no Welsh colleagues are here today, but I am sure that they are listening to the debate—is being equipped with technology to strengthen searching and security, including portable detection poles that can be deployed at fixed points, such as at reception, and extra portable signal detectors to use on the wings in support of searches. In September, an invitation to tender was launched for the testing and purchasing of new equipment to block mobile signals at close range. Other new technology is being trialled, including body cameras, to tackle the threat posed by contraband smuggled into prisons, which includes mobile phones.

This is a further example of the Government’s continuing good work to support those working on the frontline—in this case, our prison officers and governors. A few weeks ago we debated the Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Bill, which is another good example of the Government and the Opposition working together to protect the protectors.

I will support the Bill. I sincerely wish it good and safe passage through the House, and I look forward to following its progress.

Kevin Foster: My Bill will make a big difference to the future of community radio, and this Bill will hopefully make a big difference to protecting many of our communities.
As I said in my earlier intervention, this is not just a Bill for people who have a prison in their constituency. This is about preventing people who have been sent to jail by the courts—particularly those who have been jailed as a deterrent and to protect the public—from continuing their criminal activities via modern technology. A Victorian designing a prison such as Dartmoor, which is remote and outside Princetown, would have thought prisons keep people away from communication. Many of our jails are located away from populations.

The idea for keeping people in prison is not just to punish them but to protect wider society. That means preventing people from running their activities in prison. When most of our jails were built—even 20 years ago—the explosion of technology would have been unimaginable. At that time a phone call could have been made via a mobile network, but people now effectively have an entire computer on their smartphone. They are able to tweet, to use social media and email, and to go on encrypted sites. These forms of communication are all far beyond any unopened letter, and our law clearly needs to keep up to date with that huge change. Even when the rules were passed a few years back, smartphones, smartwatches and various other items of wearable tech that could be smuggled into and used in prisons would have been unimaginable.

I welcome the Government’s action to stop contraband getting into prisons, but there is an obvious solution, which is to block the signals. That technology exists, and the onus should not be on a governor to turn over a jail by the courts—particularly those who have been sent to jail by the courts—particularly those who have been jailed as a deterrent and to protect the public—from continuing their criminal activities via modern technology. A Victorian designing a prison such as Dartmoor, which is remote and outside Princetown, would have thought prisons keep people away from communication. Many of our jails are located away from populations.

The onus should also be put back on the operators. Most operators will be up for this, because I cannot see any national network wanting to install a mobile mast that would happen in this of all debates—we have a mobile phone has been lost, allowing it to be found by the earth that is.

Mr Speaker: Order. That most peculiar noise is not reminiscent of any mobile phone known to me. It is an extraordinary pinging sound that should be discontinued. I suppose it shows the breadth and diversity of mobile phone noises. I hope the problem has now been addressed.

Kevin Foster: Thank you, Mr Speaker. It is ironic that that would happen in this of all debates—we have a debate on where it is inappropriate for a mobile phone to be used being interrupted by a mobile phone left on the Benches. I suspect the Member whose phone it is will find the Deputy Chief Whip of our party wanting to talk to them about her views on where mobile phones are not appropriate. It is not just in jails, but in the Chamber.

Mims Davies: I would like to help the debate and my hon. Friend. I believe that was a signal displaying that a phone has been lost, allowing it to be found by the person looking for it. This highlights just how technically able these phones can be—we may not know how capable they are.

Kevin Foster: I completely agree with my hon. Friend on that. Modern phones can monitor someone’s heartbeat and health, and do a range of other things. We have just touched on how they can even be used to determine location, which becomes a real issue as this technology gets more accurate. One of the great train robbers was helicoptered out of a prison, so knowing exactly where someone is in a large complex can be a very useful piece of information for someone looking to carry out a violent break-out. Making it clear that someone cannot just be pinned down via mobile phone or a piece of wearable tech is one of the things—

Wendy Morton: I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) for giving us the benefit of her wisdom. I was concerned that you might look at this Bill and think that there is perhaps some use for it here in the House of Commons, Mr Speaker—but we hope not! On a more serious point, my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) was touching on security and safety in relation to the mobile phone that went off a few moments ago, and he was making a salient point. Does he agree that at the heart of this Bill there is something important in relation to the safety and security of prisons, all the prison staff and everybody who resides in a prison?

Kevin Foster: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend on that. I suspect that someone might propose an amendment in Committee to say that we should define this Chamber as somewhere where certain things can be interfered with, particularly the noise of a mobile phone.

This Bill is about public protection. It is not about putting in place a rule just to spoil someone’s fun. It is about taking someone offline and stopping them using technology for harassment, as my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) discussed, for the purpose of continuing to manage their criminal gang, for locating exactly where someone is in a jail or for intimidating prison staff. I will not provide names, as it is not appropriate for me to do so and I do not have this person’s permission, but I have had to deal with a member of our prison staff who was badly assaulted while doing his duty in one of our prisons. He explained to me that sometimes certain prison staff will be targeted by some of the inmates and by gangs outside. Again, technology does not help us on that, as it allows images to be taken, people to be located and others to see who is there. We forget that a mobile phone is not just a way of communicating; it is a way of recording almost everything that is going on.

Wendy Morton: I wonder whether this Bill will also help to reduce prisoner-to-prisoner bullying and harassment that could occur through mobile phones.

Kevin Foster: It has the potential to do so, although there will always be issues with those who are confined in spaces because of violent offences and the backgrounds they have. My key concern is preventing their being able to do this outside and to continue intimidating victims. I have a particular concern about those on remand intimidating witnesses. The whole point is that they are
in on remand to prevent them from absconding and from interfering with a witness, who may be the main part of the evidence against them. An ability to communicate outwards opens up opportunities to do so or to co-ordinate with people with whom they should not be co-ordinating via a mobile phone. The technology is in place, which is why it is right that through this enabling Bill—it does not set out the whys and wherefores—we are allowing providers to switch off those phones. As I mentioned earlier, they do not want their networks to be used for these purposes. They want to ensure that they are secure.

I am conscious that time is moving on. I am pleased to support the Bill and I note the work that is being done. As my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills pointed out, when about 13,000 mobile phones are seized in prisons each year that is not just a minor problem. I welcome the efforts being taken in every prison in England and Wales, and, given that the operators work on a UK-wide spectrum, I hope that there would also be co-ordination with authorities in Northern Ireland and Scotland—although no Members from those two nations are in the Chamber—to crack down on people in jail.

I suspect another technology we will return to is drones, and how they start to impact on safety and security in prisons. We have seen dramatic footage online and in the media of what is happening, and it would be interesting—although probably not in this Bill—to discuss how we can use technology as it develops to prevent drones from entering certain areas or to interfere with their command signals. That will probably not just be an issue for prisons, and I know that a Bill on drones is forthcoming. That will be a good thing for us to debate.

It is absolutely right that today's Bill has been introduced, because, ultimately, it provides that stop. We can do a lot of work, we can have body scanners, checks and cell searches, but ultimately the way to kill off a mobile phone is to break its signal and stop it being used. We need to say to the operator that they have the ability to do so, and that there are ways in which they can locate a phone that is being used, as we have seen in cases of missing persons or that have tracked back what was happening with a phone. Fundamentally, a mobile phone regularly being used within the confines of a prison wall is a mobile phone that should not be being operated. It should be switched off. It is a potential breach of the sanctions.

As has been said, people are sent to jail as a punishment for criminal offences or because, in order to protect the public, it is in their interest to take away an individual's liberty and certain ways of communicating. None of us would suggest that someone on remand for a sexual offence should be able to put letters into the postal service without their being monitored; the situation should be exactly the same in this instance and with electronic communication.

**Wendy Morton:** Does my hon. Friend agree that the Bill sends out a strong signal to those in prison that the use and holding of a mobile phone will not be acceptable anymore?

**Kevin Foster:** I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. It will send out a strong signal by helping to cut off a signal; ultimately, that is what the Bill will do.

I am conscious that we are on Second Reading. There will clearly be opportunities in Committee and on Report to explore the Bill in greater depth, and any commensurate orders that the Government introduce to implement it will offer the opportunity for parliamentary scrutiny.

I totally welcome the Bill, which is part of our catching up with modern technology and ensuring that people are kept safe. That is why it is vital that it is given its Second Reading and that it has Government support. I am certainly looking forward to hearing my hon. Friend the Minister's comments. I welcome the debate so far and hope all hon. Members will give this Bill the Second Reading it deserves.

1.54 pm

**Mims Davies** (Eastleigh) (Con): I, too, congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Ms McVey), who is in the Chamber today, on introducing the Bill, and my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) on taking it up. I have not yet had the pleasure of taking a Bill through the House, so I am delighted to be part of the process. I know that my right hon. and hon. Friends have been adamant campaigners on this issue. This absolutely matters to my hon. Friend, given the prison in Lewes, and I congratulate her on an excellent speech.

We are in a sphere of new challenges—I see the Minister in his place, and I look at the notes from the MOJ about the challenges in our prisons—and it is vital for the safety of our prisoners, prison officers and visitors that every necessary power be available. I found myself having a strange conversation with some prison governors during the Conservative party conference—they were not at the conference; they were on a walking holiday and found themselves in the same hotel as me. They had started their careers as prison officers and they raised several points with me, as well as highlighting many of the changes they were facing.

I mentioned in an intervention the issue of coercive behaviour and the conducting of threatening and dangerous relationships from behind bars—for example, prisoners continuing to coerce and threaten family members or, as we have heard, people going through a court process. Some prisoners, though deprived of their liberty, can still cross the line and threaten individuals. That was of great concern to the prison governors. I also mentioned earlier my surgery work with prison officers at Winchester Prison. In fact, some of my early surgery work involved supporting them in their challenging job. They raised with me, a new Member of Parliament, the fact that new technology was affecting how they worked. They were keen for the MOJ to understand the growing pressures on their security and the issues they had to deal with.

**Maria Caulfield:** My hon. Friend makes an important point. Does she not agree that prison officers work under very stressful conditions and that the Bill would enable them to get rid of the curse of mobile phones in prisons, take the pressure off them and make prisons a safer working environment?

**Mims Davies:** I absolutely agree. That was exactly their point—that it was becoming a more dangerous and difficult job, that they could be tracked down, perhaps on the school run or in the community, through
connections within the prison, and have their families threatened. It was enlightening to learn about the pressure on our prison officers brought about by the changes in technology to which prison inmates still had access.

Let me put that in context. Winchester Prison was built in 1846. It is a typical Victorian prison. It has a capacity of about 690 inmates and now takes offenders from the age of 18. It does great work on community rehabilitation—it is one of the 10 pathfinder prisons—and is working hard to reduce violence, incidents of self-harm and suicide and is doing as much as is humanly possible to make sure that time spent in prison is practical and useful for the next stage of their lives. If, however, a prisoner is still being hassled from the outside and cannot get away from it, how can they move on?

Hon. Members will recognise the concerns raised in the House over several years about the use of mobile phones in prisons. For every prison in England and Wales, being equipped with technology is vital. We heard earlier the annoyance of a phone going off when it is not wanted, but if someone relies on it and cannot get a signal, it is a disruptive force, and that is simply what the Bill does. It is so important. We heard the figures earlier: 13,000 mobile phones—an increase of over 7,000 in just three years; 7,000 SIM cards, and these all have a value within the prison environment. Some inmates will be digital natives, having grown up with digital technologies, and for them connectivity will be absolutely normal, so being deprived of it could be very helpful.

This is an excellent Bill, and I think it will be very helpful in prisons. The interference we have seen with the court process, and the impact of social media on juries and judges, is highlighted in our courts now, so we need to make sure that prisons are not another place where pressure can be applied.

I commend this Bill and I wish it a safe passage, because it matters to our prison staff, to their families, to visitors and to all the people who rely on our prisons being secure. It will also help our governors, and eventually keep our communities safe. Ultimately, that is what we are looking for: to rehabilitate and help people and to keep our communities safe. I wish the Bill all the speed and help our governors, and eventually keep our communities safe. I wish the Bill all the speed and security, and about the pace and character of technological change in the 21st century. That is why the Bill has my support, in that it will equip our law enforcement officers and security agents—those at the forefront who are tasked with the difficult challenge of keeping us all safe—to stay three, four or five steps ahead of the criminals. That is important if they are to be effective in disrupting plots, to identify threats, to intercept communications and to properly take action before attacks are carried out.

Mims Davies: Given her time in the law, will my hon. Friend comment on how the change in mobile technology has affected the court process and the matters she was involved with, and on how we must catch up when it comes to mobile phone usage and the pressures in the prison system?

Suella Fernandes: I am grateful for the reference that my hon. Friend makes. Yes, I was a barrister for 10 years and worked in and out of the courts. Part of my work was serving on the Treasury counsel panel defending Government Departments, including the Ministry of Justice, and decisions by the Parole Board on sentences. On occasion, I visited prisons in that capacity.

The use of mobile technology has transformed not only the way that people in prisons communicate but, in relation to my hon. Friend’s point, the way in which we use our courts system. I am very glad that this Government are at the forefront of leading technological change in our courts so that we can speed up the filing of papers and the exchange of documents. We can even use technology so that witnesses can be cross-examined or examined-in-chief via satellite television links. Inmates in prison can be questioned by counsel in a court on the other side of the country if it is not convenient or feasible for them to travel. This technology has been integral in speeding up justice. Obviously that should not be done at the cost of good justice and proper decisions, but it cuts costs and enables swifter decision making, and that cannot be a bad thing.
I have a particular interest in this Bill because, along with my hon. and learned Friend the Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer), who I see in the Chamber, had the privilege of serving on the Joint Committee on the draft Bill that became the Investigatory Powers Act 2016. It was an extensive Bill that dealt with the very issue we are talking about—powers to enable our law enforcement agents, intelligence officers and policemen to be ahead of the curve when tracking down crime. During its passage, we met many experts at the forefront of this challenge, and also many opponents of greater security powers such as Liberty and Big Brother Watch—organisations that advocate for privacy rights. I applaud their work in many respects.

In the course of my work on the Bill, I was struck by the pace and the character of technological change. Methods that we all use innocently to book holidays, to buy our shopping and to communicate with friends and family across the world are also, sadly, abused by people who are trying to harm society and take advantage of vulnerable people. Terrorists use WhatsApp. Serious fraudsters use telecommunications. Paedophiles use secret Facebook groups to pursue their insidious aims. I am glad that this Bill is the next step in this fight. It will continue the Government’s work in cracking down on crime, and it has my full support.

2.7 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) on bringing this sensible and important private Member’s Bill to the House today. She set out very eloquently and persuasively a strong case for the need for the Bill. In particular, she highlighted the fact that it extends powers in the 2012 Act, and is very necessary. There was no need to go to the trouble of placing a mobile phone in the Chamber; Labour Members readily support and agree with the Bill.

I do not really disagree with anything that Government Members have said. All hon. Members have made very persuasive arguments for and cases in support of the Bill. A key thing that was mentioned several times is that in recent years the number of illegal mobile phones confiscated has rocketed, with 7,000 confiscations in 2013 rising to 13,000 in 2016. That makes it clear that further action does need to be taken to curb their use. Those behind bars are not just using phones to call friends and family; they are using them for a range of criminal purposes, from arranging criminal activities on the outside to arranging contraband to be smuggled in.

While we support the Bill, the wider intention to cut down smuggling and contraband and the Bill’s role in broader prison reform are also important. Although restricting the operation of phones may reduce their use and complicate smuggling, that alone will not stop it. This is not a silver bullet. The Bill will not stop the demand for contraband, as there will always be a demand for banned items, specifically drugs and new psychoactive substances, which are among the most dangerous of the items smuggled into prisons that we must crack down on. Indeed, the demand for NPS has risen dramatically, just as their dangers have increased, with a serious impact on offenders’ mental health and rates of violence and even deaths in prison.

The Bill will not stop that, despite its good intentions, because there are technical challenges in achieving 100% success in blocking mobile phones. Indeed, phones are just part of the wider problem that makes substance smuggling in prisons possible. Many factors make it easier, such as the decreased number of prison officers. The number of band 2 to 4 officers fell from 31,000 in 2010 to 22,000 in 2017, substantially reducing the ability of prisons to restrict the flow of contraband. Without prison officers, we cannot hope to stem the flow of contraband, because we will not have staff on the balconies and the wings, inspecting incoming and outgoing packages and even getting to know prisoners to effectively gather intelligence.

The Government supported the 2012 Act as a means to tackle substance misuse in prison, but they failed to back it up with other measures to tackle contraband, such as ensuring that we have a fully staffed and trained prison officer workforce. Instead, they are choosing to make the prison officers’ jobs even harder, leaving them overworked and underpaid. Blocking mobile phones is just one strand of the efforts to tackle contraband, but it requires other approaches, too. The Government should remember that if the Bill moves forward. This Bill should be just one part of prison reform, not all of it.

As other hon. Members have pointed out, the Bill originally appeared as clause 21 of the Prisons and Courts Bill, but that Bill was dropped at the election and the prison aspects were not taken up in the courts Bill. It is worrying that the Government now have to rely on private Members’ Bills to legislate for such important reforms. That calls into serious doubt the Government’s ability to progress with other much needed reforms. We are concerned that efforts to improve prisons will rely on handout Bills and Back Benchers’ good will.

To sum up, there is a wider substance misuse and smuggling problem in our prison estate, which is having a damaging effect on prison safety. We support the Bill and the powers to tackle the use of mobile phones and the supply of contraband to prisons. The wider intentions of the Bill are to restrict the use of phones to arrange criminal activities and organised contraband smuggling, but it will not solve the contraband problem. Instead, the Government have to get their act together and commit to real changes and real reform.

2.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) for bringing forward this Bill. I note that she is the second Member to be associated with it, the first being the Treasurer of Her Majesty’s Household, our right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Ms McVey). Recognising my hon. Friend’s considerable talents, I hope from a selfish perspective that she is not elevated as quickly as our right hon. Friend, so that the Bill can proceed through the House quickly.

I strongly agree with my hon. Friend’s assessment that the Bill is an important contribution to making our prisons safe and secure. The Government strongly support it, and I urge Members on both sides of the House to do the same. The reason for our support is clear: the illegal supply and use of mobile phones present real and serious risks not just to the stability of our prisons, but to the safety of the public.
The Bill addresses one of the most serious current threats to the safety and security of our prisons. Illicit phones erode the barrier that prison walls used to place between prisoners and the community. They can be used to harass victims and carry on extremist activity, as well as for organised crime, gang-related activities and commissioning serious violence. This is therefore a serious problem for our prisons.

I note the point made by the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) about the wider issues of prison security and stability, but the Bill focuses on just one aspect of our plans to bring safety and security to our prisons. Mobile phones are key to the illicit economy in prisons, whether they are used for co-ordinating the smuggling in of contraband, or for organising payments for the contraband once it is inside. That in turn drives a devastating cycle of debt, violence and self-harm.

We need to benefit from technological advances. Those involved in organised crime have benefited from the rapid pace of technological change when it comes to smaller, more sophisticated phones becoming available, or new network frequencies being activated. We need to turn the tables on the criminals, and to do so we need to make even greater use of the skills and knowledge of the mobile network operators. We are already working closely with operators to develop groundbreaking technology so that we can block mobile phone signals in prisons. Making mobile phones in prisons ineffective in such a way is the surest means of disrupting the market for those involved in organised crime.

The Bill provides the enabling powers that will enable us to continue such direct partnership working. It will allow us to continue to tap into operators’ expert knowledge and specialist skills to come up with new and creative solutions to address the problem of illicit mobile phone use in prison. As my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes made clear, the Bill is not tied to any one technical solution. It provides a clear line of accountability in primary legislation to allow mobile network operators to be more directly and independently involved, while retaining appropriate safeguards to regulate activity. That makes the powers in the Bill as future-proofed as they can be.

Members have made several points during this debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) rightly raised the link to coercive behaviour, and I welcome her support of the Bill. I confirm that improving the effectiveness of anti-mobile phone activity is intended to minimise opportunities for bullying, harassment and coercive activity behind bars. As I said at the start, public protection is the Government’s No. 1 priority.

The Bill will help governors by providing them with an extra tool to tackle the prison security problems posed by mobile phones. Under the 2012 Act, governors are required to comply with directions from the Secretary of State and to make decisions about the retention and disclosure of data. The amendments that will be made to the Act are not new obligations, and we judge that they will not impose any unimaginable burden on governors.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes mentioned, we should of course make provision for prisoners to contact their families. That is important for prisoner rehabilitation and to help to reduce the incidence of self-harm, as well as to bring stability to our prisons. As we tackle the illicit use of phones, we will continue to provide legitimate ways in which prisoners may contact family and friends. I recognise and endorse my hon. Friend’s powerful point.

In conclusion, I thank my hon. Friend for taking on the Bill, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatsfield for her earlier work on it, and my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) for his sterling work in starting all this off in 2012. This Bill is important for prison security, and for protecting victims and the public, and I commend it to the House.

2.19 pm

Maria Caulfield: With the leave of the House, I thank all hon. Members who have taken part in this debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) asked about the Bill’s impact on prison governors, but it will actually reduce their workload because responsibility will lie firmly in the hands of the mobile phone operators. Governors have tried hard to keep up with technology, but each time that we move from 2G to 3G or 4G, they have to start the process again.

My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) made the excellent point that mobile phones are no longer just phones; they are small computers with a wide range of capabilities. Blocking phone signals will not just block people’s ability to make calls, but stop them from communicating in other ways.

My hon. Friend the Members for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) and for Fareham (Suella Fernandes) highlighted the important work that is being done in HMP Winchester and the fact that prison officers have asked for such legislation to make their lives easier. I welcome the support for the Bill from across the House. The shadow Minister highlighted the wider impact that this Bill will have in our society, because it is not about just reducing crime and problems in our prisons.

The only objection to the Bill seemed to be when mobile phones fought back against it live in the Chamber, so I hope that it has cross-party support. I am grateful for the widespread support for the measures. The Bill is small but important, and it is gratifying that it has been endorsed by Members on both sides of the House. I am not surprised by that endorsement because I believe that there is a shared understanding of the problems in our prisons, and a shared willingness to try to deal with them.

I thank the Bill’s sponsors: my hon. Friends the Members for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies), for Angus (Kirstene Hair), for Copeland (Trudy Harrison), for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) and for Christchurch (Mr Chope), the hon. Members for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Paul Farrelly), for North Durham (Mr Jones) and for Jarrow (Mr Hepburn), and the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey). The fact that those sponsors include a Member for Wales shows that there is support for the Bill across the United Kingdom. Although the Bill will not apply in Scotland, I understand that the Scottish Government hope to introduce changes.

If the Bill receives its Second Reading, I will look forward to it completing all remaining stages successfully. If and when that happens, I am confident that it will make a significant contribution to improving the safety and security of our prisons.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time; to stand committed to a Public Bill Committee (Standing Order No. 63).
that there will be an opportunity for the debate to be adjourned until a time when, with any luck, the need for it will have evaporated.

2.30 pm

The Speaker interrupted the business (Standing Order No. 11(2)).

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 11 May 2018.

Business without Debate

COASTAL PATH (DEFINITION) BILL

Motion made. That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 11 May 2018.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE (NATIONAL DATA GUARDIAN) BILL

Bill read a Second time; to stand committed to a Public Bill Committee (Standing Order No. 63).
TYRES (BUSES AND COACHES) BILL
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 19 January 2018.

Mr Speaker: A splendid day—my birthday.

JUDICIAL APPOINTMENTS AND RETIREMENTS (AGE LIMITS) BILL
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 11 May 2018.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope) will be a very busy bee on that day, in addition to all the others.

REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE (YOUNG PEOPLE’S ENFRANCHISEMENT AND EDUCATION) BILL
Resumption of adjourned debate on Question (3 November), That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Debate to be resumed on Friday 11 May 2018.

VOTER REGISTRATION (NO. 2) BILL
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Mr Speaker: Second Reading what day?

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): A very important day, Sir: your birthday next year.

Mr Speaker: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman shares my sense of the day’s importance—the view will not be universal.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 19 January 2018.

Passports: Parental Identification
Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Chris Heaton-Harris.)

2.32 pm
Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): Travelling with one’s child should provide lasting, happy memories. From seeing how our little ones react to their first flight to watching how they take on their first journey on the channel tunnel, travelling with a toddler can prove both thrilling and—as I am sure you are aware, Mr Speaker—stressful in equal measure. However, for a growing number of parents in the UK, trips abroad are blighted by confrontations that are both unnecessary and entirely avoidable.

I have chosen to highlight this issue because I believe that a critical purpose of our work in the House is to ensure that British institutions keep pace with the changing nature of our constituents’ lives. Throughout the past century, as women have fought for economic and political equality with men, it has been this House that has introduced laws to cement progress and make those campaigns worthwhile. From the Equal Franchise Act 1928 to the Equal Pay Act 1970 to the Equalities Act 2010, Britain has a strong record of addressing the grievances of the marginalised, but also of being proactive to ensure that the British institutions can support the ever-diversifying demographics of British society. With that in mind, I intend today to focus on the issue of children’s passports, and to draw attention to the unfortunate reality that a number of parents are being penalised simply for failing to share their child’s surname.

Before I address the scale of the problem, I should probably declare an interest: I am a parent who does not share a surname with my young daughter, and I was stopped at the border on my return from a recent trip to France. As my husband Chris and I approached passport control, I happened to be carrying Azalea and pushing the pram, and, through no fault of anyone’s, I was separated from my husband in the queue. When I reached the counter, the border official looked at my passport for a long time, looked at my daughter’s passport, and then said, “Who is this girl?” I am sure Members can imagine my surprise. I replied, “This is my daughter.” I accept that my daughter looks very different from me: for a start she is quite tall for her age—if people can believe that. I told the official that she has my husband’s last name, a decision we took collectively upon her birth. To my shock, the situation became quite tense. The official kept asking me for more and more documentation, which I did not have, and I explained over and over again that the child had my husband’s last name, not mine. My daughter was saying, “Mama, mama,” and crying because the unfortunate incident took so long, but even that did not seem to convince the border official.

My problem was that there was a real air of suspicion and I was made to feel that I was doing something wrong when I had just gone on holiday with my daughter and husband. I then had to go and find my husband, bring him back to the border official and convince him that this was my husband, this was my daughter and I was the mother. I wonder what would have happened if my husband had not been there. Would they have let us go? What would have happened next? These are the kinds of questions that many people have emailed to me since this incident came to light.
It is not only women who travel with their children; numerous LGBT couples have contacted me regarding their adopted children. One such couple said that they “have been questioned mercilessly at the borders wherever they go.” The same applies to foster parents.

I have a few statistics that I would like to share with the Minister. Between 2010 and 2014 at least 600,000 mothers and fathers have been quizzed at airport, ferry and Eurostar terminals because our out-of-date passport system does not recognise that their children might have a different surname from them. That was first highlighted by the Parental Passport Campaign a few years ago, and it is a reasonable assumption that more than 1 million people could have been quizzed in this manner by now.

Choosing to retain a surname is a neutral choice. I know that some choose to see it as a feminist statement and I certainly abide by the notion that no woman is a maid property. However, for me, the increasing numbers who keep their surnames are often just a simple reflection of changing life circumstances. According to the experts at STEP, who advise families on succession planning, more than 3 million couples in the UK choose to cohabit, rather than marry or enter a civil partnership.

I personally chose to keep my surname for professional reasons. I was already elected as a councillor under my name when I got married, and had also written for my local newspaper under my name, so I felt no need to take a new name. A number of high profile surveys in recent years have shown that I am far from alone in this choice. According to a 2013 survey by Facebook of its 33 million UK users, women are increasingly keeping their own names. Some 38% of women in their 20s said they were intent on keeping their surname after marriage, up from 26% of women in their 30s. A 2016 YouGov survey showed that “for those people who wanted themselves and their spouse to keep their original surnames upon marriage” the most popular option, at 42%, was for the children to have a combined version of their parents’ surnames. The next most popular option in the YouGov survey was for the child to receive the father’s surname, which was preferred by 32% of men and 21% of women, while only 18% of women and 12% of men wanted their children to receive the mother’s surname.

While the YouGov poll found that 59% of women would take their husband’s name—again, a perfectly valid choice—that figure is a huge decrease from that in a similar poll into British attitudes in 1994, which found that 94% would take their husband’s surname. So the trajectory of this trend is clear, and provides an undeniable opportunity for our passport authorities to consider the need for change.

From the day that the excellent Guardian reporter, Jess Elgot, covered my troubles at border control, I have been inundated with emails from parents who have faced the same situation. I will relay some of their anecdotes shortly, but first I want to reflect on the Government’s position on this issue.

Our Border Force has a duty under section 55 of the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009 to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. Work to protect vulnerable children and those who could potentially be trafficked is vital, and I pay tribute to the efforts of the Border Force in that endeavour. Child trafficking is an unspeakable evil, which is why nothing I am suggesting today would compromise the efforts of the Border Force to tackle it; quite the opposite. I hope that my suggestions will reduce an administrative burden on the Border Force and make it easier to separate those engaging in criminal behaviour from those parents who are simply trying to go on holiday with their kids.

The Government’s position on this issue is inflexible, and their reluctance to engage with simple solutions is quite surprising, not least as any such changes to passports would not require legislation. In September and October, I asked the Home Secretary a number of questions on the matter. For one, I asked whether the Government had any record of the number of occasions on which British women had been asked by border control to prove they were related to their children. The Minister responded by saying that this was not something that the Government recorded, and that it was therefore not possible to provide the information. The Minister added that “it is not currently mandatory for a parent to produce documentation that explains their relationship to the child they are travelling with”.

In principle this is welcome, but such a position has not prevented many thousands of British parents from being unduly harassed and interrogated by officials at the UK border. Similarly, when pressed on the need for reform in 2014, a coalition Minister said:

“A passport is a document for travel. Its fundamental purpose would change if it were to be used to identify a parental relationship.”

I find that strange. The Government’s policy is to stress the need to verify the identity of parents and those travelling with children, yet they also try to swat the issue away by suggesting that a passport’s fundamental purpose would somehow change if it were to be used as an identification document.

Before I outline my proposal today, I want to reflect on three particularly problematic cases that I hope will prompt Ministers to give more considered responses on this. I will not be letting this matter drop! The first case involves Helen, who wrote to me following her ordeal at Gatwick in August, on her return from holiday in Italy. She mentioned that her eldest daughter was from her first marriage and did not share her surname. She also mentioned that her daughter had special needs and struggled with her speech and social situations. After a long wait at passport control, Helen’s daughter was asked, “Is this your mother?” Helen explained that her daughter was unable to provide reliable answers, and that in the process of having her passport updated, she had actually sent paperwork to explain her condition.

The border official had no information on record about her daughter, or about who her primary carers were. Helen rightly asks what would have happened if she had allowed her daughter to answer the original question. She might well have said no, and then what would have happened? The assumption would be that Helen’s daughter may have been questioned separately. Helen tells me that this would have led to her daughter having a major meltdown that could have caused long-term emotional damage. After this, Helen was informed that she should have registered her daughter’s disability with Gatwick airport, as it is the airport that can offer support, but this was not pointed out when she applied for the passport. In her email to me, Helen said:
I cannot explain in an email how painful this was for us all, genuinely thinking that our re-entry to the UK depended on my daughter who has minimal cognitive ability and all because of her surname.

Another anecdote I want to share with the Minister is about Jane, a mother of three, who wrote that she was left “incredibly angry and deeply humiliated” by a dispute involving her 12-year-old daughter at Stansted earlier this year. She explained:

“They refused to believe I was her mother because we didn’t share the same name and in the end my husband had to be called back from the baggage carousel to ‘claim’ her. I felt incredibly angry and deeply humiliated. I will travel with my children’s birth certificates in future but feel furious that I should have to do this.”

Samantha similarly wrote in with her experience at border control, saying:

“Every time I have re-entered the UK I am made to prove that I am the mother of my daughter. My daughter is 7 in a few weeks and over the last few years has been quite distressed by the atmosphere of accusation and suspicion, even though I always travel with a copy of her birth certificate.”

Samantha raises an extremely valid criticism of the process, which seems to be disproportionately focused on the parents’ return to the UK. She said:

“This situation astounds me on many levels, but my main concern is the lack of attention to people allowed to leave the UK. I have travelled with my daughter to a number of countries all over the world and have never been asked to prove her identity when leaving the UK. This means that she could be taken away from me, anywhere, by someone, when I am children’s passports were introduced in the 1990s and list the child’s name and date and place of birth only. It is high time that they were updated to reflect the changing circumstances of British families. Expanding the details in children’s passports to include their parents would improve the time taken when passing through immigration and would relieve stress upon the numerous airport security measures. Support for including both parents’ names on child passports has come from across the House, and many of my colleagues support my efforts today.

I will finish with a few questions for the Minister. Does he accept that including both parents’ names on child passports does not require legislation, nor would it require great expense? The names of the parents are recorded on the application for a child’s passport, so why not make the names available to border control when the passports are being checked so that the relationship between adult and child can be established? In addition, is it not the case that border officers could simply have access to the registry office database in the case of couples that are married? Does the Minister accept that including parents’ names on child passports could save time, confusion and, ultimately, money at the border?

Surely the Government can see that that would help the authorities to identify when a child is related to the adult accompanying them. Lastly, will the Minister commit to reviewing children’s passports? If Brexit is to bring new passports for the country as a whole, now seems as good a time as any to iron out issues with the current format.

Those questions are important because the current situation, whereby parents are subject to harsh questioning at the border, is unfortunately creating a great deal of upset. For many, it feels like 1950s’ attitudes to marriage are prevailing at the detriment of common sense and acceptance of how the nature of families is changing. Neither I nor the many thousands who have signed up to the campaign want to interfere with anything that prevents child trafficking, but it is clear that the policies need amending to recognise that more and more children will not have the same surname as both of their parents. I do not want my daughter to grow up thinking that the only way to avoid being penalised at the border is to adopt the surname of her future partner. She and the many thousands of children currently in the same situation should be able to grow up in a world where they can travel as easily, knowing that their identity is one of their choosing and does not leave them treated as criminals by over-zealous border officials. I hope that the Minister can address the points that I have raised, so that we can move on from a policy that is not achieving its stated aims and is making many hundreds of thousands of people extremely unhappy.

2.47 pm

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): I genuinely congratulate the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) on securing this debate and, as she made clear, on giving voice to the many people who feel aggrieved about the issue—that is not in doubt. She is entirely right that the bureaucratic systems that we set up have to keep up with the times. Her experience at the airport sounds horrendous, and I would feel exactly the same as her if I was in that situation. Her experience has triggered a reaction from the many people who have been made to feel the same way. She said that she was made to feel as though she had done something wrong, and that is wrong.

I encourage the hon. Lady to listen carefully to the end of my remarks, because I will place on the record some things that I have to place on the record, some of which will sound a little inflexible and unhelpful. However, I spoke with the Immigration Minister this morning, and he wants to try to find a way forward. If that is not evident from the probe that I am about to disgorge, I ask her to listen carefully to the end of my speech. There is a lot of common ground here, and I am sure that the hon. Lady and I are as one on wanting to ensure that people legitimately entering the UK have an experience that is as swift and easy as possible when crossing the border. Everyone shares that objective. As a parent of six, I understand some of the additional challenges of travelling with small children, so I certainly do not underestimate the stress that that can cause, and our border system should not be doing anything to exacerbate that stress.

I am sure that the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn will agree that ensuring a smooth and swift passage through the border cannot be the only objective.
It is equally important to carry out checks to ensure that those who cross the border are doing so lawfully and legitimately, which of course involves carrying out checks and a Border Force officer conducting an interview where any factors warrant further interest.

An important element of that—again, I am sure there is no difference between the hon. Lady and me on this—is ensuring that the system protects the welfare of children whenever they are travelling with. Of course, the vast majority of children who cross the border are travelling with one or both parents, often returning from a holiday, and there are absolutely no grounds for concern.

But, sadly, we cannot ignore the fact that there are cases that give rise to safeguarding concerns where children are taken across borders, be it because they are travelling without the consent of others, because of trafficking, forced marriage or abduction, or because they are travelling in contravention of a court order. Additionally, there will be many instances where children travel when not with a parent or guardian—again, mainly with consent, but there are occasions when that is not the case. I hope the hon. Lady will agree that we have to take reasonable steps to ensure that we avoid putting children at risk.

Quite rightly, Border Force officers are required at all times to consider and protect the welfare of children who are travelling. Under section 55 of the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009, all those concerned with the operation of the borders and immigration system have a statutory duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children, which means they may stop anyone where they have reason to undertake further checks. The key point is that this duty would not change, nor should it, if parents’ names were to be included in children’s passports.

I understand why the hon. Lady makes these suggestions, and I can see why it appears attractive to provide information to border officials from a verified source. However, information in a passport can only reflect the situation at the point when the passport was issued. Children’s passports last for five years, and a lot can happen in that time. Relationships can break down, parents may disagree on the best arrangement for the child, and the police, social services or the courts may become involved. Information in a passport could rapidly become out of date. The point about observations is that they, like the core information in a passport, are designed to be about the individual and last for the lifetime of the passport.

The hon. Lady may be aware that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office adds the name of the person with whom a child is travelling to an emergency travel document when it replaces a lost passport. However, it should be remembered that, in such instances, the family will be subject to interview. All those with parental responsibility must provide consent, and the document is for a single verified journey. The person or persons travelling with the child will have been subject to at least the level of checks undertaken by Border Force.

I appreciate that questioning by a Border Force officer may appear intrusive or unnecessary, although, as I have explained, it is done from the best of motives. To allow those travelling with children to prepare, and to make travel as smooth as possible, we have published a leaflet available on gov.uk titled “Children travelling to the UK” setting out in what circumstances we might ask questions of a person travelling with a child and why we might do so—principally the child protection reasons I have set out.

The leaflet sets out suggested documents the accompanying adult might want to bring to help smooth the process. It also refers to the questions we might ask and contains a firm commitment:

“We will always do this as quickly as possible and in a way which is sensitive to the interests of the child and the adult involved... We do not wish to delay your journey any longer than necessary.”

I appreciate the sincerity of the hon. Lady’s position and the way in which she has advanced her cause. When she says she will not give up, I absolutely believe her. I have sought to explain that there are formidable difficulties with what she proposes, and we need to be certain that nothing we do, however well intentioned, has the effect of increasing the risk to children. As a mother herself, I am sure she will appreciate that.

Having said that, I have spoken to my right hon. Friend the Immigration Minister and I know he understands that the present situation is causing difficulties, particularly in cases where children have a different surname from that of a parent. I am therefore happy to give the hon. Lady the commitment, on his behalf, that he will actively consider how we can take this forward. Child protection is an absolute imperative, and we cannot compromise on that, so I am certainly not going to stand at this Dispatch Box today and make promises that cannot be delivered on. However, I do give her the absolute undertaking that he will give this matter his fullest consideration, with the aim of trying to find a workable solution. I again congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate and I am sure that this will not be the last word on this matter, either from her or from the Government.

Question put and agreed to.

2.55 pm

House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Homelessness and Rough Sleeping

1. Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): What assessment he has made of trends in the number of homeless people sleeping rough between 2010 and 2016. [902691]

2. Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment he has made of trends in the number of homeless people sleeping rough between 2010 and 2016. [902692]

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): There are too many people sleeping rough, and I am determined to do more. That is why I will be leading a ministerial taskforce that will drive forward the implementation of a cross-Government strategy to help tackle this issue.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I thank the Secretary of State for his answer, even though he did not answer my question. The reality is that since 2010 rough sleeping has risen by 134%. Worse still, this Government have encouraged local authorities to use public place protection orders to criminalise and fine rough sleepers when they accept food or money from kind strangers. When on earth is he going to do to curb this?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady is talking about trends. Let me remind her that statutory homelessness acceptances reached their peak in 2003 under the previous Labour Government, and since then they have come down by more than a half. But of course there is much more to do, and she is right to highlight this issue. That is why I am sure that she will welcome all the work that this Government are doing in this area, including £1 billion of dedicated funding over this spending period.

Tracy Brabin: According to Shelter, one in 2,122 people in Kirklees is currently homeless. My local drop-in homeless shelter has seen numbers double in the past six months alone, with the biggest cause being the termination of private rental agreements. What is the Secretary of State doing to make tenancies more secure, and what steps is he taking to tackle soaring private rents?

Sajid Javid: Again, the hon. Lady is right to emphasise this issue, which many Members on both sides of the House have worked hard on. I thought she would welcome the funding we are providing, including the announcements made by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor just a couple of weeks ago on more funding to tackle homelessness, which will help in all constituencies, and the ministerial taskforce, which will make an effort across Government.

Paula Sherriff: Many young homeless people fear being trapped in local authority temporary accommodation when they lose their housing benefit under universal credit. Given the revelation that roll-out has been delayed in the constituencies of the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, and his two predecessors, will the Secretary of State agree to pass on the concerns of Kirklees Council and suggest that the delay might be applied elsewhere?

Sajid Javid: I hope that the hon. Lady will join me in welcoming universal credit as a policy that helps to get people into work, including in her constituency. Where there have been issues, my right hon. Friend the Work and Pensions Secretary has listened carefully. He responded through the recent Budget, including with changes that will help people who were getting housing benefit, such as the new transition to universal credit housing benefit that will help some 2.3 million people.

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): The recent National Audit Office report on this issue showed that while councils have increased their spending on tackling homelessness, they have reduced their spending on preventing it in the first place. These priorities seem to make no sense. May I urge the Secretary of State to ensure that all councils reverse this trend so that we can properly tackle the causes, not just the symptoms?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend speaks with experience; as a former Housing and Planning Minister, he knows these issues well. He is right to highlight this. That is why it was important that the whole House supported the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, which is coming into force in April next year. With that, there will be new burdens funding of over £70 million for local authorities.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): I am sure that the Secretary of State agrees that for as long as one person remains rough sleeping in our nation, it is a national tragedy that we must do something about. At the same time, does he not accept that there is often a complex of reasons to do with mental health, being in the military—I am very concerned about that—physical health, and drink and drug abuse? Those are the complications, and making it some kind of party political issue actually diminishes the interests of these people.

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend right. This is one of those issues that I think we can safely say that every Member of this House is concerned about. If we work together we can achieve more. I am sure that he will...
welcome, for example, the funding of £28 million for the Housing First pilots announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor, which will help people to deal with the complex needs that he talks about.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing additional funding in the Budget to help people who are homeless. Will he elucidate what he is going to do to roll out the programme to combat rough sleeping right across the country so that we can end this national scandal once and for all?

Sajid Javid: Let me once again take the opportunity to commend my hon. Friend. Friend for all the work that he has done, in this House and beyond, to combat homelessness, including with the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, which he championed. He is right to highlight the new funding that has been provided: £28 million for the three Housing First projects, and an additional £20 million to help to prevent people in the private rented sector from getting to homelessness in the first place. We will be looking carefully at, and talking widely about, how best to make use of that money.

22. [902713] Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): One million pounds is about to be cut from Stoke-on-Trent City Council’s homelessness budget by the Conservative and Independent Alliance that runs the authority. That will push the job of supporting homeless people on to excellent organisations such as the YMCA, which is run, in my constituency, by Danny Flynn. If those organisations cannot count on support from local authorities, what help will the Minister give direct from central Government to make sure that voluntary organisations that help homeless people get the resources that they need?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman is right to ask what central Government can do to help. One of the ways we are helping is by providing the resources nationally—over £1 billion of funding to 2020, which is the highest budget that has ever been dedicated to combating homelessness.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I, too, want to mention the work of YMCA. YMCA Black Country and Rachael Taylor in my constituency run an “Open Door” programme that places young people in family homes so that they can continue to enjoy a family life. Will the Secretary of State join me in visiting this work in my constituency?

Sajid Javid: I take this opportunity to thank my hon. Friend for the work that he has done in this area since long before he came into the House; I know that he continues to champion such work. I will very happily join him in his constituency. I hear that the work the YMCA has done throughout the country, including in his constituency, has been exemplary.

23. [902714] Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Over 120,000 children are set to be without a home and living in temporary accommodation this Christmas—an increase of 66% since 2010. Why does the Secretary of State think that the number of homeless children fell under Labour but has risen under the Conservatives?

Sajid Javid: Every homeless person is vulnerable, but children are particularly so. That is why we must work together to do all that we can. The funding of over £400 million for the flexible grant that is provided through local authorities can help, but the new taskforce will also take on that work to see what more we can do across Government.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): Homelessness is a very complex issue, and I am sure that everyone in the House agrees that it is something that we should not be facing. What discussions has my right hon. Friend had across Government Departments on, for instance, mental health, which is always identified as an issue in homelessness?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right to say that the causes of homelessness and rough sleeping are very complex, and not just economic. He is right to emphasise that mental health issues sometimes play a part. My right hon. Friends the Health and Education Secretaries have announced a Green Paper on the mental health needs of children and young people, and this is an appropriate time to make sure that we are doing everything we can as a Government.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): May I begin by paying tribute to the former Labour MP Jimmy Hood, who was MP for Clydesdale and my home town when I was growing up, and who I understand has died today? My thoughts and those of the Scottish National party are very much with his family and friends.

Shelter has found that eviction from private tenancies in England accounts for 78% of the rise in homelessness, and some of the people who are made homeless will almost certainly end up sleeping rough. Will the Secretary of State look at protection measures such as the Private Housing (Tenancies) (Scotland) Act 2016, which came into force last week and which includes measures such as banning no-fault eviction?

Sajid Javid: May I first associate myself with the hon. Lady’s comments about Jimmy Hood? He will be sorely missed by the House.

The hon. Lady made a point about the Scottish experience of combating homelessness. One thing we want to do is to look at best practice outside England. We want to look at whether there are some things to learn from Scotland, and some measures have been suggested by my Scottish friends. For example, we are looking further at the Housing First policy from Finland.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): The hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) has just broken the news to the Opposition about Jimmy Hood’s death. He was a huge humane figure in Scottish Labour and in this House, and he will be sorely missed.

The Secretary of State tries to tell us that the Government have a good record on homelessness. Since 2010, Ministers have made 452 announcements on homelessness, but 47,000 more children are now homeless; that is more than 100 additional homeless children for every Conservative press release. What is needed now is action to deal with the root causes of this rising homelessness, not more
warm words. I have a straight question for the Secretary of State: will there be any further cuts in funding in this Parliament for homeless hostels and women’s refuges under his plans for short-term supported housing?

Sajid Javid: Last week, the right hon. Gentleman and I attended a parliamentary reception in the Commons for St Mungo’s, where he rightly talked about—we both talked about—how some issues are above politics and it is important for Members on both sides of the House to co-operate on them. Homelessness and rough sleeping is one of those issues, and I know that he meant what he said so I take his question seriously.

We have no plans to cut the funding, whether for women’s refuges or for other support we are providing in relation to homelessness. Indeed, in my right hon. Friend the Chancellor’s Budget just a couple of weeks ago, we saw an increase in spending and resources to fight homelessness.

John Healey: The problem is that many of the decisions the right hon. Gentleman’s Government have taken have made this so much worse. In his consultation document on supported housing, he pledges to protect funding only in 2020-21, which is why homelessness charities, such as women’s refuges and Women’s Aid, are so concerned that there is still a risk to their future services. The tragedy is that we know what works because we have done it before, when Labour was in government. If he wants to act on a cross-party basis, will he back Labour’s plan to end rough sleeping homelessness within a Parliament, provide 4,000 extra homes for rough sleepers, review the social security system and build the new low-cost housing that is needed?

Sajid Javid: With respect, the right hon. Gentleman is being a bit disingenuous in his use of those figures and so-called facts. He will know that when it comes to women’s refuges—

Mr Speaker: Order. “Disingenuous” means dishonest and—[Interruption.] Indeed. The word cannot be said without a response. The Secretary of State is a most versatile fellow—very dextrous in his use of language—and I am sure he will withdraw it and use some other word. [Interruption.] Order. I cannot hear what the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner) is chuntering from a sedentary position, but we can always have a cup of tea later.

Sajid Javid: I withdraw the word “disingenuous”, and let me say that the right hon. Gentleman is not being as clear as he could be if he wanted to be. When it comes to women’s refuges, we have dedicated £20 million, which will provide some 2,200 additional bed spaces. In future years, it will be right to see what the demand is and make sure we make appropriate resources available.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Bolsover is right to say that if somebody who uses an unparliamentary word refuses to withdraw it, that Member has only one place to go—and that is out. That applies across the piece, but to be fair, the right hon. Gentleman did withdraw the word, so the crisis has been averted. [Interruption.] Order. Anyway, it is on the record and I hope the hon. Gentleman is now content. He has a beatific smile on his face, and I think this should be canned.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): I read “Erskine May” every day.

Mr Speaker: Indeed.

Adult Social Care

3. Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure that adult social care services are adequately funded.

Mr Betts: In the Budget statement, the words “social care” did not pass the Chancellor’s lips. Indeed, in response to a written question, he said that he really did not give any consideration to the funding needs for social care for the next financial year, although the Local Government Association estimates that there is a shortfall of about £3 billion. Does the Secretary of State agree with the Chancellor that no more money is needed for social care, or will he press the Chancellor for a rethink?

Sajid Javid: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the work that the Select Committee, under his leadership, does on social care. I listen carefully to the issues that he brings up, and I am sure he will recognise that this £2 billion over the next three years will make a huge difference, and means that £9.25 billion will be dedicated to this over the next three years. There are longer-term issues and some real challenges, and that is why we will bring forward a Green Paper on social care next year.

Alex Cunningham: I was rather stunned to find out that local authorities do not have to consider the quality of care when offering a care home place. According to the Care Quality Commission, that means vast numbers of elderly people are being forced to live in facilities that are either inadequate or require improvement. The profit-making sector is failing, but rather than pass the buck to local authorities, which are cash-starved, what will the Secretary of State do to ensure there is enough money in the system to enable every elderly person to live in a good home?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight that it is the responsibility of local authorities to help look after some of the most vulnerable people in society, and of course they should be careful about the quality of care they provide. That is why the CQC is independently involved, to look at the quality of care provided. We also have to make sure that the funding is there. As I have just said to his hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield
South East (Mr Betts), extra resources have been provided, with £2 billion over the next three years, and we are also looking at the longer-term challenges.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Are we abandoning Dilnot?

Sajid Javid: The Government have rightly decided to look at a whole host of issues that have an impact on adult social care because of our ageing society. The appropriate approach is to take the time to get it right and have this Green Paper on adult social care.

Local and Regional Economies: Transport

4. Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Transport on investment to support the growth of local and regional economies.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): Our Departments have developed a joint programme of work to better integrate our funding decisions and policies so that we maximise economic growth and deliver an improved transport system for Great Britain.

Judith Cummins: Why did the autumn Budget not allocate any new funding to the Yorkshire and Humber region as part of the northern powerhouse, when there is clear evidence of underfunding for the rail network across the region?

Jake Berry: The Transforming Cities fund of some £1.7 billion, of which £850 million remains unallocated, is available to all local authorities to bid for to improve intra-city transport. In total, we are investing £13 billion in northern infrastructure in this Parliament—more than any Government in history.

21. [902712] Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Some £5.8 million has been invested, under the second devolution deal, to unlock congestion in the west midlands, and the west midlands tram network will be expanded to Dudley—or Dud-lie, which I believe is the correct pronunciation. Will my hon. Friend prevail on the Secretary of State to continue to liaise with the Mayor of the west midlands, Andy Street, so that that good work can continue?

Jake Berry: I am sure that everyone in the House was delighted that in the Budget we agreed a second ambitious devolution deal with Andy Street. While my right hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) will open a debate on tolls on the Mersey crossing. Does the Minister accept that the fact that people cannot cross the Mersey between Warrington and Liverpool without paying a toll, whether across the bridge or through the tunnels, is holding back the regional economy? If so, will he have urgent discussions with his colleagues at the Department for Transport, to rectify the situation?

Jake Berry: I have already held discussions with Steve Rotheram, the Labour Mayor of Liverpool, who told me that he supported the toll charges.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): Swindon is building houses at roughly three times the rate of the national average and we wish to go further. Does the Minister support Swindon’s proposal to use the Transforming Cities fund to extend the Oxford and Cambridge rail link to Swindon, which would unlock further new homes in Swindon?

Jake Berry: That is a tempting invitation to support a bid to the Transforming Cities fund. That is exactly what the fund is designed to do. When people make good, ground-up, locally supported proposals, the fund, on a competitive basis, should be there to support them.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): London received almost £2,000 per person in transport investment, while the figure for Yorkshire and the Humber was just £190, the north-east just £220, and the north-west £680. Even if every penny of the £800 million that has been referred to was allocated to the north, it would amount to just £53 per head. When will the northern powerhouse get the money it needs to compete on a par with London?

Jake Berry: I am sure that the left-wing think-tank, the Institute for Public Policy Research, is delighted its figures have been repeated in the Chamber, but they are simply incorrect. They do not include 60% of our national infrastructure spending or the spending on HS2, which I know, as someone who was born and brought up in the north, and who lives and works there, will benefit the north more than any other part of our country.

Northamptonshire County Council

5. Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): What information his Department holds on the financial status of Northamptonshire County Council.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): We collect a range of financial data on local government, which is published online. Local authorities also publish their own financial data, including budget documents and accounts. We routinely engage with a range of local authorities to discuss various issues, including finance.

Mr Hollobone: Will the Minister confirm that a major review of fair funding for local government is under way? Given that Northamptonshire County Council is considering closing 28 of its 56 libraries, will he encourage it to bring forward innovative proposals to set up a county-wide libraries trust to keep those vital facilities open?

Mr Jones: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that we are pushing ahead with our review of fair funding for local authorities. I certainly encourage Northamptonshire County Council to look at all innovative ways to provide the services that are valued by its local residents.
Mr Speaker: Mr Philip Hollobone must be followed by Mr Peter Bone.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): In the light of the county council’s financial situation, would the Minister be keen to look at emerging proposals from across Northamptonshire about how local government might be better restructured?

Mr Jones: We recognise the financial pressure that Northamptonshire County Council is under and we stand ready to look at any locally led proposals from across Northamptonshire on how local government might be better restructured to transform challenges into opportunities.

Home Building

6. Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to ensure that more homes are built.

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): In the autumn Budget, we announced further reforms and financial support to increase housing supply in England. This includes more than £15 billion of new financial support, at least £44 billion of funding to 2022-23, and reforms to ensure that more land is available for housing.

Andrew Bowie: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. The work of his Department and the pledge in the Budget to build 300,000 new homes in England are very welcome, and will go some way to address growing intergenerational unfairness when it comes to getting on the housing ladder. Will he join me today in calling for the Scottish Government to match the Scottish Conservatives’ pledge to build 100,000 new homes north of the border so that young people in my constituency can have the same opportunities to build as those in constituencies in England?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman can now breathe.

Sajid Javid: I absolutely join my hon. Friend in doing that, and he is right to highlight this issue. The Scottish Government, even on their own targets, have been failing consistently on house building, especially affordable house building. I commend the ideas, energy and ambition shown by the Scottish Conservatives in challenging the Scottish National party to build more homes in Scotland.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Not a single new home has been registered in York in the last quarter. In the light of the Secretary of State’s rejection of the draft local plan, due to the council’s complete failure to address York’s housing crisis, will he ensure that he works with councillors across the piece, including Labour councillors, to get it right for the city with regard to the houses that need to be built for our future?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady will know that the Government have invested huge amounts in the past few years to make sure that house building picks up. The rate was down to 100,000 homes a year when the Government took office in 2010, but the figure for the latest year is 217,000. There is a lot more to do, including in York. I have written to the council in York and we are considering with it what we can do to speed up its planned development.

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): In Berlin and elsewhere in Germany, architects, landowners, homeless people and local councils co-operate to bring forward thousands of new dwellings through mutual housing co-operatives. Will the Secretary of State encourage local councils here to consider that option as a way of bringing forward more dwellings more quickly?

Sajid Javid: I agree with the direction my hon. Friend sets out. One issue highlighted in the housing White Paper, which we are tackling as we implement it, is how we make sure that we have more diversity of supply. That includes different types of supply, including custom-build and co-operatives. My hon. Friend is right to highlight that and I commend him for his work in this area.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): In New Ferry, we are desperate to build new homes as part of the regeneration following last March’s explosion. I am still disappointed that the Government refused to help with emergency costs for New Ferry, but will the Secretary of State confirm that he received Wirral Council’s email of last week containing the regeneration plan, and will he now step forward and fund the regeneration that New Ferry desperately needs?

Sajid Javid: I can confirm to the hon. Lady that we have just received the local council’s plan—I believe we received it five days ago, having waited five months. I am not sure why it took so long, but now that we have received it, we will take a close look at it.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): Will the Secretary of State reassure my constituents that although there is an obvious need to build more houses, green-belt restrictions have not been loosened and the green belt will still be protected in my very rural constituency?

Sajid Javid: I can reassure my hon. Friend. Friend that no changes have been made to green-belt rules and that building on the green belt requires exceptional reasons. There were no changes in either the housing White Paper or the recent announcement by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor. The change we did announce was for more funding to make sure, for example, that we get the right infrastructure in the right places to help us to build more homes.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The Scottish Parliament has delivered more than 69,500 affordable homes since 2007, during the period of SNP government, and the new-build social sector completion rate is at 72 per 100,000 population, compared with just 49 in England. Why exactly was there no commitment to increase social rented housing in the Budget?

Sajid Javid: We will take no lectures from the SNP when it comes to housing. In Scotland, under the SNP’s leadership, the number of housing starts has declined by 40%, the number of housing completions has fallen, the rate of housing ownership has fallen, and all affordable
housing targets are being missed. It is about time that the hon. Lady stopped lecturing and started listening to the Scottish Conservatives.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The Secretary of State just referred—rightly and approvingly—to the aspiration of home ownership. In the last year of the Labour Government, 54% of under-45s’ homes were owned by their occupants, but under this Government, that figure has plummeted to 44%. Given that the Chancellor has cut the money for starter homes in the Budget, will the Secretary of State tell the House what he has learned from seven years of Conservative failure? What will he do to give hope to our under-45s?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman talks about failure in the delivery of housing, but I think that he has got the wrong party. The track record of the Labour Government of whom he was a part included a massive fall in house building in this country—to its lowest level since the 1920s—a decline in social units for rent of 421,000, and almost a doubling of the waiting list for social housing. Their record on housing was one of the worst that this country has seen. If he wants to do something about it, he should support the policies of this Government.

Unauthorised Traveller Encampments

7. Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to tackle unauthorised Traveller encampments.

Alok Sharma: The Minister for Housing and Planning (Alok Sharma): As my hon. Friend knows, the Government are concerned about unauthorised encampments and the effect they can have on settled communities. That is why we will be issuing a call for evidence on the effectiveness of enforcement against unauthorised developments and encampments. I will publish that call for evidence shortly.

Alok Sharma: Since 2010, nearly 128,000 homes for social rent have been built in England, and 118,000 have been built for affordable rent. The hon. Lady talks about the money available for housing. I can confirm that, as my right hon. Friend the Chancellor said in his Budget statement, we are making at least £44 billion available over the next five years.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): The hon. and learned Lady is an illustrious QC, so I am sure that she is capable of asking an extremely pithy question.

Lucy Frazer: I will try, Mr Speaker. East Cambridgeshire has established five community land trusts. Does the Minister agree that such trusts are a valuable way of ensuring that local people can have affordable homes locally?

Alok Sharma: My hon. and learned Friend makes a very important point. I commend her for the work that she is doing in encouraging the development of community land trusts, for which I announced additional funds only last week.
9. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): What assessment he has made of trends in the number of new homes for social rent since 2010.

**Alok Sharma**: The reference to the need for a competitive return?

**Kerry McCarthy**: Shelter has found that in the past year developers have used viability assessments to wriggle out of building more than 2,500 affordable homes to rent or buy, including 200 in Bristol. Will the Minister take steps to remove that loophole when he rewrites the national planning policy framework next year by, removing the reference to the need for a competitive return?

**Alok Sharma**: One of the key issues in our consultation on local housing needs, which closed on 9 November, was viability assessments. We will of course review what comes forward, but we have made it very clear that we want developers to build affordable homes.

19. [902710] **Richard Graham** (Gloucester) (Con): After 13 years of Labour MPs in Gloucester in which not a single new social housing unit was built, we now have built some new social housing, but we want to do much more through a master plan involving the Government’s estate regeneration programme. Will my hon. Friend confirm that money may be available through the new national productivity investment fund to help to bridge any potential funding gap caused by low values?

**Alok Sharma**: I commend my hon. Friend for the work that he is doing in his constituency to encourage more building of homes, including social homes, and I am delighted by the progress that is being made in estate regeneration. My hon. Friend’s constituency has received £1.25 million of capacity funding. More detailed eligibility criteria for the national productivity investment fund will be announced in due course, and I shall be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the matter further.

17. [902708] **David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): There was much fanfare in the Budget about housing, but when will the Minister start to understand that if the Government are to tackle the social housing crisis, they must abolish the right to buy?

**Alok Sharma**: Of course we support the right to buy. It has meant that people have been able to own homes, which I think is incredibly important. We are making more money available for affordable homes but, as I have said, there will be at least £44 billion over the next five years so that more homes can be built. We have a housing crisis now because not enough homes were built under the last Government.

**Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): If we are to meet the demand for more affordable homes, there needs to be a partnership between the private and public sectors. What actions can the Minister take to ensure that local authorities work with both sectors in order to deliver the homes that we need?

**Alok Sharma**: In the Budget, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor set out the planning reforms that we are looking at, which will have an impact on local authorities bringing forward more sites more quickly for building. We have also announced an uplift of up to £1 billion for the housing revenue account, which will make a substantial difference.

**Victims of Domestic Violence: Social Housing**

12. **Andrew Percy** (Brigg and Goole) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to ensure access to safe social housing for victims of domestic violence.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government** (Mr Marcus Jones): Victims fleeing abuse must be given appropriate priority access to social housing. We are consulting on new guidance that makes it clear to local authorities that victims moving on from refuges should be given the appropriate priority and that any residency test should not be applied.

**Andrew Percy**: Members on both sides of the House hold Women’s Aid in high regard. It has stated that the Government’s new model will close refuges. What assurance can the Minister give the House that that will not be the case?

**Mr Jones**: I can reassure my hon. Friend that that will not be the case. We will continue the funding at exactly the same level as currently. There will be a dedicated grant for local authorities that will be ring-fenced in the long term, and we will also make sure that vulnerable people will not need to deal with the payment of rent at a very difficult time in their lives.

**Helen Hayes** (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): The recent joint Select Committees’ inquiry on supported housing recommended that the Government should establish a national network of women’s refuges to avoid a postcode lottery and to ensure that there is even coverage across the country. Why did the Government reject that recommendation? What will they do to ensure that there is even coverage and that refuges reopen in those areas of the country where they have closed?

**Mr Jones**: We believe that it is right to have a locally led approach in this regard, but we have confirmed that we are committed to reviewing this policy in 2018 under the violence against women and girls strategy. We are looking at all the options, and we have not ruled out nationally commissioning refuges and refuge beds if that is found to be a better solution.

**Devolution: Derbyshire and the East Midlands**

13. **Nigel Mills** (Amber Valley) (Con): What progress he has made on devolving decision making to local communities in (a) Derbyshire and (b) the east midlands.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government** (Jake Berry): Following the launch of our industrial strategy, the Government are in the early stages of designing a devolution framework for...
England. Areas such as Derbyshire and the east midlands should seek widely supported, ground-up proposals in line with the framework.

Nigel Mills: After the failure of the earlier devolution proposals, can the Minister confirm that the Government are still interested in further proposals coming from Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire, perhaps along the lines of the Derby and Nottingham metro proposal published a couple of weeks ago? Can he also confirm that there is now no requirement for an elected mayor?

Jake Berry: We are of course aware of Derby and Nottingham City Councils’ metro proposals, although we have not received a formal submission to the Government. I can confirm that the door remains open for devolution in this area and that, in line with our manifesto, there is no requirement for rural areas to have a mayor.

Sir Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): In the North East Derbyshire constituency and my own, the INEOS shale gas fracking company has applied for its planning application to be determined by the national Planning Inspectorate, not the local authority. Does the Minister condemn that?

Jake Berry: I cannot comment on a live planning issue.

Business Rates Retention

14. Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): What assessment has he made of the implications for local authorities outside London of full business rates revenue retention by London local authorities. [902705]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): Local authorities in London have estimated that the business rate retention pilot announced in the Budget will benefit them by £240 million. There will be no impact from the pilot on other local authority areas.

Helen Goodman: Will the Minister explain how it can possibly be the case that business rates in London raise £7.5 billion and retention only gives £240 million? Surely this is swiping money from the rest of the country, which needs it in order to even up resources.

Jake Berry: The £240 million is new money from business rates growth. Let me share with the hon. Lady the startling fact that 100% of the local authorities that will get the business rate localisation pilot applied for it. When she goes back up to her constituency, she might like to ask her own Labour-controlled council why it could not be bothered to do so.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Gentleman pass on the message very forcefully to the Secretary of State that many of us applaud what he said in relation to Donald Trump’s retweeting of certain messages? My difficult question is: why does he not get on with the job of ensuring that the regions of our country get a fair share of resources, and stop piling money into London and the south-east?

Jake Berry: I noted that the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, said that this was the worst Budget for London in 10 years. What I know is that, at £1.8 billion, it was the best Budget for the north of England ever.

High-rise Buildings: Disabled People

15. Chris Williamson (Derby North) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to ensure that disabled people are not housed on the upper floors of high-rise buildings. [902706]

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Alok Sharma): Decisions on who is allocated particular properties are ultimately for local authorities and landlords to take at local level. However, our statutory guidance on social housing allocations encourages councils to give appropriate priority to those who need ground-floor accommodation, including disabled people.

Chris Williamson: The Minister will be aware that several disabled people were housed on the upper floors of Grenfell Tower at the time of the fire earlier this year. One disabled woman, whose name was Flora, would certainly not have survived had it not been for the heroics of her son, who carried her to safety from the 24th floor. Can the Minister assure the House that the Grenfell inquiry will consider access and egress for disabled people living in tower blocks? Will he also tell us whether disabled and independent abled organisations will be able to have their voices heard in the inquiry?

Alok Sharma: The Grenfell inquiry is independent, so I will let the judge take care of that. I can tell the hon. Gentleman that the Government will be publishing a social housing Green Paper next year, and that I am conducting a tour of the country and meeting social housing tenants directly. Of course we will consider access to accommodation for disabled people that is suitable for their needs as part of that work.

Garden Towns

16. Mrs Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con): What support his Department is providing to local authorities to develop new garden towns. [902707]

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): We are working with 24 garden cities, towns and villages across England to unlock barriers, broker solutions and support them with infrastructure needs. I am announcing today £3 million of additional capacity funding for 14 garden villages, bringing our total funding through this programme to £19 million.

Mrs Badenoch: The Secretary of State will be aware that my local authority of Uttlesford is proposing three new garden communities, but significant infrastructure is required first. What reassurance can he give them that investment for this will be forthcoming?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the need for infrastructure when it comes to housing, which is why I am sure she will welcome the increase in funding that was in the recent Budget. I am also launching today a £25 million planning delivery fund and inviting...
bids from ambitious councils, and a consultation on regulations that will enable the creation of locally led new development corporations.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State accept that, when new developments are built, it is not in the interests of householders that they are leasehold estates? Will he reiterate the statement he made in July that the Government will not allow the building of any new leasehold homes, and act for those who are already being unfairly treated?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady will know that a consultation on this has just closed, and we will be responding to it shortly. I have said before, and I am happy to repeat, that I see no reason whatever for new houses to be sold on leasehold.

Homelessness

Vicky Ford: I thank the Government for their work on implementing the Homelessness Reduction Act. Will the Minister give us an update on what money and resources are being made available to local councils so that they can help us to achieve this ambition?

Mr Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for her very good question. We are providing £72 million to enable local authorities to deal with the new burdens. In advance of the implementation next April, the first tranche of actual funding will go out to councils tomorrow. We will also review the new burdens funding within two years of the implementation of the Act.

Liz Mclnnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Is the Minister aware of the pioneering work being done in Greater Manchester to eradicate homelessness? Does he agree with Mayor Andy Burnham that the Government’s target of 2027 for the eradication of the problem is much too far away?

Mr Jones: Of course we want to eradicate rough sleeping as soon as is practicably possible, but we are providing funding under the Housing First pilot to help Greater Manchester, along with the Liverpool city region and the west midlands.

Topical Questions

T1. Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): Today marks the start of UK Charity Week, in which we redouble our commitment to working with the likes of Shelter, Crisis and St Mungo’s to end rough sleeping in this country. It is also the 62nd birthday of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who last month delivered a Budget to help get Britain building—many happy returns to him. On the 226th birthday of The Observer, I am pleased to say that we are continuing our crackdown on local authorities that think it is their job to publish weekly newspapers.

Daniel Zeichner: Dockless bike schemes have recently been established in several cities. Some are working well and some less so, but councils are left struggling with outdated legislation to deal with such schemes. Will the Secretary of State meet me and others from affected areas to discuss the right way forward?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue. It is important that we encourage better ways for people to travel and give people more opportunities, and I am happy to have a chat to discuss his ideas.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): We are spending more than £1 billion up to 2020 on the implementation of the most ambitious legislative reform in decades—the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017—and establishing a homelessness and rough sleeping implementation taskforce.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Several national children’s charities and the Local Government Association wrote to the Secretary of State ahead of the Budget to warn that funding for children’s services is unsustainable and insufficient. Instead of creeping to the Chancellor with birthday wishes, what did the Secretary of State do to lobby the Chancellor to provide the £2 billion that councils need to properly safeguard and look after children in need?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight the pressure on children’s services in many local authorities up and down the country, and that is why we are listening carefully to what local authorities have to say and working with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education to ensure that adequate resources are provided. Many local authorities are doing very well, but some are experiencing challenges. The hon. Gentleman will know that the local government finance settlement is coming along shortly, and he can look to see what happens with that.

Andrew Gwynne: The Secretary of State does not just need to listen; he needs to act and perhaps read our “Local Government Health Check” report, which highlights that children’s services are facing a £2 billion funding gap now. Early intervention has been cut, Sure Start centres have closed, child protection cases have doubled, more children need taking into care, and ever more families need specialist help, so why will the Secretary of
State not stand up for our children’s services and tell the Chancellor that now is not the time to cut £4.75 billion from the bank levy? It is time to put our children first. 

**Sajid Javid:** Time and again, the hon. Gentleman stands at the Dispatch Box asking for billions and billions of more spending. He has no idea how the funds are raised, and he would do much better to support the measures that we are taking to keep our economy strong so that we can pay for all those services.

**T6. [902735]** Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): The move to calculate business rates using CPI instead of RPI is reducing bills for many small businesses across the country, but 62 councils are yet to move to CPI despite the Government providing budget funding. What are the Government doing to ensure that all councils use CPI to calculate their business rates?

**Mr Marcus Jones:** While the vast majority of local authorities have re-billed their businesses, it is unacceptable that some councils still have not. The Government have given councils a £435 million package of support for businesses, so I urge all councils that have not yet done the right thing to do so urgently.

**T2. [902731]** Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): Given that England’s private rented sector has doubled since 2002, what plans do Ministers have to emulate Scotland’s exemplary new policy under which such renters now have longer notice periods, indefinite security of tenure and a limit of one rent increase a year?

**The Minister for Housing and Planning (Alok Sharma):** The hon. Gentleman will have noted that in the Budget the Chancellor set out our plans to consult on longer tenancies in the private rented sector, and that is precisely what we will be doing.

**T7. [902736]** Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): The positivity of small businesses in Bedworth last Saturday was tinged with frustration at Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council’s decision to increase car parking charges, which has reduced footfall and seen fee income reduced by £200,000. Does the Minister agree that our councils should be far more focused on supporting our town centres, not on driving shoppers away?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry):** Only a Labour council could put up parking charges and lose money at the same time. What that shows to people living in Nuneaton and Bedworth is that, by putting into action the Marxist twaddle we hear from Labour Members, under Labour it is the many who pay for the dogma of the few.

**T4. [902733]** Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): The Surrey Vaults in Bristol has become the latest small music venue to close because of noise complaints. Can the Minister tell us how discussions are going with the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport about plans to introduce an agent of change principle into planning law so that small music venues are able to stand up to developers?

**Jake Berry:** I would happily meet the hon. Lady to discuss her interesting idea.

**T8. [902737]** Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): I am sure the Secretary of State will have seen today’s report from the British Chambers of Commerce, which concludes that, for our businesses to grow and compete, it is vital that local authorities provide an adequate supply of building land and consents for new commercial buildings. I know he is considering business rate retention, so will he ensure that proactive councils, such as Rugby Borough Council, continue to receive incentives to grow their local economies?

**Mr Marcus Jones:** The Government are still committed to further business rate retention. We have relaunched our working group, which is our officials and the Local Government Association, to take that work forward. It is important that any future reform of the system has a balance between meeting need and having an incentive for areas to grow their tax base.

**T5. [902734]** Ruth Smeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): Bus users in the Potteries have been hit by a double whammy of fare increases and journey cuts. Although my constituents might appreciate the irony of two lots of bad bus news arriving at once, they certainly do not appreciate the inconvenience or the impact on their jobs. Many of those cuts could be avoided if Stoke-on-Trent City Council was prepared properly to subsidise public transport. What support is the Minister providing to ensure that we have a bus system in the Potteries that is fit for purpose?

**Sajid Javid:** This Government have done much to improve bus facilities throughout the country, especially in the new metro mayor areas where we have extended bus franchising. If the hon. Lady has particular issues, the Department for Transport is the policy lead, and I would be happy to pass her questions on to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport.

**James Heappey (Wells) (Con):** The affordability of a house is not just what it costs to buy or rent each month but what it costs to live in it thereafter. May I therefore encourage the Secretary of State to set the highest energy efficiency standards possible for new houses so that they can be cheap both to own and to operate?

**Alok Sharma:** Energy efficiency, as a result of the policies this Government have put in place, has improved. Fuel costs are now several hundred pounds cheaper than they were in 2010.

**T9. [902738]** Mr Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab): Councils in the north-east such as Gateshead Council and South Tyneside Council have seen their central Government grant cut by 50%, forcing them to axe 4,000 good jobs. The Government’s so-called jobs bonanza in the north through the northern powerhouse has created jobs, but two out of every three of those jobs are on temporary, insecure and zero-hours contracts. Is that how the northern powerhouse economy will work?

**Sajid Javid:** I had thought the hon. Gentleman would welcome the fact that in his constituency the claimant count has fallen by some 42% since 2010. If he really
wanted to champion Gateshead and more funding, including for jobs and investment, perhaps he might ask why the mayoral devolution deal was rejected last year.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): With the abolition of stamp duty for most first-time buyers, families in Wealden will save, on average, £3,209 on their first home. Will the Minister say what else is being done to help families secure their first home?

Alok Sharma: Of course I am delighted that my hon. Friend has highlighted the stamp duty cut, but we also know that for a number of years we have been running the Help to Buy scheme, which has helped 135,000 households already, and the extra £10 billion committed a few weeks ago will help another 35,000 households.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): I listened to the Secretary of State’s response to my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) and heard no acknowledgement that the cuts by his Department to local authority funding and the removal of the weighting for deprivation have a massive impact on our country’s children—on their physical and mental health, and on their ability to access a wide range of services. Why does the Secretary of State not care?

Sajid Javid: I know that the hon. Lady cares about this issue, but she should recognise that many Members in all parts of the House care about it, too. That is why this Government have made sure that for children’s mental health services, through local authorities, there is dedicated funding of £1.4 billion over this spending period, which is the highest ever. In addition, the Green Paper that will be published by my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary will look at many of the long-term issues.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I noted with interest the Secretary of State’s comments about funding to support the delivery of garden villages. Will he confirm that this will include the development at West Carclaze in St Austell? If so, will he meet me to discuss how we can ensure that these new homes are affordable and accessible to local people?

Sajid Javid: Let me thank my hon. Friend for his support for more funding for garden villages. The announcement will be made later today, and I will look carefully at making sure that it is clear about the ones we are supporting. He should also be clear that this is the first stage of support and we will be taking many other actions in due course, as set out by the Chancellor in the Budget, to support more garden villages and towns.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The Minister said earlier that there would be a review of the viability assessments under the national planning policy framework. Will he admit that there is a problem, which the Mayor of London and London councils see, and that these viability assessments are abused by developers to stop local authorities and others developing affordable homes?

Alok Sharma: On London, it is worth pointing out that we have made £3.15 billion already available for affordable housing. That has been welcomed by the Mayor of London, so I suggest that he should start and get building. On the viability assessments, as I have said, we have had a consultation, which we will reflect on and come forward with proposals.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): In his response to an earlier question, the Minister made reference to a call for evidence on unauthorised Traveller encampments. Will he confirm that local residents will also be able to feed in to that?

Alok Sharma: I can confirm to my hon. Friend that everyone will have an opportunity to give their views as part of that call for evidence.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The northern powerhouse Minister mentioned HS2 as being the best transport investment for the north, but surely the best transport investment for the north would be “Crossrail for the north”, linking the great cities of the north with high-speed rail.

Jake Berry: Improving the east-west connectivity between Liverpool and Hull is one of the issues that we have asked Transport for the North, the first sub-national statutory transport body, to report on when it comes forward with its report. I am delighted that in the Budget we have a confirmation of £360 million to ensure that HS2 is future-proofed against HS3.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): What assessment has the Minister made of whether owners of buildings with cladding that may not meet building regulations have been meeting their responsibilities or whether they have been seeking to pass the costs for this essential work on to leaseholders?

Sajid Javid: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. He will know that local authorities and housing associations have made it clear that they will not be passing on the costs, and that is the right approach. I would like to see private sector landlords follow the lead of the social sector and not pass on the costs to their tenants, but I also want to make sure that leaseholders have more information, which is why today I am announcing an increase in funding for the Leasehold Advisory Service.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): People in Barnsley and Doncaster are now voting on the future of Yorkshire devolution, and we will get the results on 21 December. Does the Minister agree that, whatever the results, national and local politicians have a responsibility to get round the table and work together to serve the best interests of the people of Yorkshire?

Jake Berry: As the season of goodwill and peace to all men approaches, I hope that across Yorkshire a compromise will be found. Just to restate our position, the Government remain committed to the south Yorkshire city deal proceeding.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD) rose—

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: Two Members are standing and seeking to catch my eye who have not contributed. I will call each of them, but their questions must be extremely brief—a short sentence. If you cannot do it that way, I do not want to be unkind, but don’t bother.
Wera Hobhouse: Last month, the Secretary of State decided not to call in a planning application on Foxhill, where we are losing 99 homes for social rent, telling us that the development is in line with Government policy. Will he confirm that losing social homes for rent is Government policy?

Sajid Javid: No.

Mr Speaker: Thank you for that good example.

Rebecca Pow: I will talk very fast, Mr Speaker. May I say a big thank you to the Housing Minister for coming to Taunton Deane last week, where he met protestors at the Staple Grove development to see how important the road through the development was? Are the Government pursuing the right policy in putting more money into the housing infrastructure fund to guarantee that we get the roads that we need to make our houses work?

Alok Sharma: Absolutely; I can confirm that, as a result of the Budget, there is £5 billion in the housing infrastructure fund, which is precisely what many colleagues want to see in terms of spending on infrastructure.

Mr Speaker: Before we move on, I have been notified of a number of intended points of order springing directly out of Question Time. I say for the record that, on this occasion, I will take Members on trust and take those points of order now. However, if it becomes apparent to me that they are really just a way of trying to continue Question Time or if they are too long, when I have specifically said that they must be short, I will cut them off and the process of taking any—[Interruption.]

Order.

I look to the shadow Secretary of State to set a good example, with a proper point of order done briefly—for which read “a sentence”.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Can you offer any guidance to the House on your expectations and on the conventions? We just heard the Secretary of State, after an hour of Question Time, say in an offhand way, in answer to the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), who has now left the Chamber, that later this afternoon he will make a statement about the backing the Government will give to garden villages and urban extensions. Surely we should have expected that either in a written statement this morning or certainly through a reference in the body of questions this afternoon, so that the House had a chance to ask him about it.

Mr Speaker: My understanding is that a written ministerial statement is expected. Whether that WMS is the WMS concerned, I do not know.

Sajid Javid indicated assent.

Alok Sharma indicated assent.

Mr Speaker: The simple nod—in fact, two nods of the head in unison by the Secretary of State and the Housing Minister—suggest that that is the gravamen of the matter. I am bound to say that it would be preferable, if such announcements are intended, for them to be worked into Question Time in some way, not by elongated replies, but by responding at topicals. What has happened is arguably irritating to colleagues, but it is not demonstrably disorderly. We will leave it there for now, but the shadow Secretary of State has made his point with his customary force and alacrity.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Will the nods appear in Hansard?

Mr Speaker: I do not know whether the nods will appear in Hansard. There will be no graphic images, but reference to the nods will appear. I hope that that satisfies the insatiable curiosity of the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman).

Luciana Berger: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) about the Mersey tolls, the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), said that he had spoken to the Metro Mayor and that the Metro Mayor supported the tolls. I have been in contact with the office of the Metro Mayor of Liverpool and he says that he said no such thing. Would the Minister like to correct the record and withdraw his remarks?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising her point of order. The answer is that it is for each and every Member, be they a Front Bencher or a Back Bencher, to be responsible—[Interruption.]

Order.

It is for each and every Member to be responsible for the veracity of what is said in this place. If a correction is required, it is better sooner rather than later. If the hon. Gentleman judges that no correction is required, that is his prerogative.

Jake Berry: No correction is required, Mr Speaker. I discussed the matter with the Metro Mayor of Liverpool as we walked across the bridge while it was under construction. Perhaps he will remember with the added detail.

Mr Speaker: In that case, we will leave it there. It was right that it was aired and I am grateful to the Minister for his response. I cannot be expected to adjudicate between the competing witness accounts.
Social Mobility Commission

Mr Speaker: We are about to come to the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) and his urgent question. Let me say to the House that this is not the occasion for a general exchange about social mobility or the lack of it. This is a question laser-like focused on the resignation of the board of the Social Mobility Commission and will be treated as such by the Chair. I want it to run for no longer than half an hour, not because it is not important—it is extremely important—but because there are eight hours of protected business, which is also extremely important, and I have to balance these considerations, so self-discipline is required.

3.41 pm

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD) (Urgent Question): To ask the Minister for Children and Families if he will make a statement on the resignation of the board of the Social Mobility Commission.

The Minister for Children and Families (Mr Robert Goodwill): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing me to take this urgent question, which gives us an opportunity to underline our commitment to improving social mobility in our country.

I am extremely grateful to Alan Milburn for his work as chair of the Social Mobility Commission over the past five years. We had already told him that we planned to appoint a new chair. We will hold an open application process for that role to ensure that we continue to build on this important work and that the foundation laid by Alan and his team can be built on.

Tackling social mobility is the Department’s priority. We are driving opportunity through the whole education system. We have made real progress in recent years. The attainment gap between disadvantaged children at the end of reception has narrowed, and the proportion of eligible disadvantaged two-year-olds benefiting from funded childcare has risen from 58% in 2015 to 71% in 2017. We are putting more money into the early years than ever before, spending a record £6 billion a year on childcare and early education support by 2019-20. We are also increasing the number of good school places, with 1.9 million more children in good or outstanding schools than in 2010. There are over 15,500 more teachers in state-funded schools in England than in 2010. There are over 1.9 million more children go to two-year-olds childcare offer has a 71% take-up compared to 43% more likely to go to university than in 2009. Our objective? The chairman of the commission was very pointed. He said that the worst possible position in politics “is to set out a proposition that you’re going to heal social divisions and then do nothing about it.”

It would be very difficult to spin the resignation of the commission in partisan terms, because Alan Milburn has conscientiously served Labour, coalition and Conservative Governments. Among the commissioners who have resigned with him, one was a highly respected former Conservative Secretary of State for Education.

I have a specific question for the Minister about the most recent of the commission’s reports, to which he will no doubt be able to respond. Why have only five of the 65 social mobility coldspots—the areas with the least social mobility, everywhere from west Somerset to east midlands cities—been covered by the various growth deals negotiated by the Government? The report makes the point that geographical division in Britain is now more extreme than in any other country in Europe, so will the Government consider reinstating the regional growth fund, which played an important role in addressing that problem during the coalition? As the barriers to social mobility often rest in incentives to work, will the Minister explain how the £3 billion cut to the work allowance will affect people’s willingness to work once they are in low-income employment?

The commission is even-handed and praises the Secretary of State for Education for her commitment. But what does it say about the Government’s commitment when the most committed and conscientious member of the Cabinet is presiding over a 60% cut in apprenticeships, which blocks social mobility through vocational education, and a 6% cut real cut in schools spending over the next five years?

Does the Minister agree with the chair of the commission’s point that Brexit is now sucking the life out of Government, and that the biggest casualties of Brexit—particularly the extreme Brexit of withdrawing from the single market and the customs union—will be the 60 of the 65 social mobility coldspots that voted for Brexit?

Mr Goodwill: I do not recognise the right hon. Gentleman’s characterisation that we have done nothing to address social mobility. Disadvantaged children are 43% more likely to go to university than in 2009. Our two-year-olds childcare offer has a 71% take-up compared with 58% in 2015. Some 1.9 million more children go to outstanding schools than in 2010, and there are more teachers in schools than ever before. We have made progress in a number of areas, including our offer of 30 hours of free childcare, which helps working families to cope with the cost of childcare while they juggle childcare and work at the same time.

I reaffirm the fact that social mobility remains a priority of the Government. I am fully committed to that, as are the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister.
The right hon. Gentleman mentioned geographical spread. If he reads the report, he will see that the spread is patchy, with parts of London demonstrating a real need for more assistance, and more needing to be done in places such as the east and west Midlands. That is precisely why we have designated the 12 opportunity areas in the places where we most need to address the situation for children in the early years, with regard to education, the aspiration to get into employment and get good qualifications and the most difficult nut to crack—the home learning environment. Many young children are starting nursery provision without the basic skills that many other children from better-off backgrounds have.

I want to make it clear that, although Brexit is an important priority for this Government, we can walk and chew gum at the same time. We are absolutely committed to ensuring that we continue the process of improving social mobility for everyone in the country.

Mr Speaker: May I remind the House of what I said fewer than 10 minutes ago? The question is about the resignation of the board, so questions should be about that matter; it is not unreasonable to hope that the same might also be said of answers.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Many people were inspired by what the Prime Minister said on the steps of Downing Street when she took office. Will my hon. Friend look into using this opportunity to reform the Social Mobility Commission to create a social justice commission at the heart of Downing Street to assess the impact of every bit of domestic legislation on social justice?

Mr Goodwill: May I put on record our commitment to maintain the Social Mobility Commission? It has done great work over the last five years, and I again pay tribute to Alan Milburn for his work as chair. We intend to refresh the commission. We need to bring in some new people—people who will hold us to account and who will hold our feet to the fire—to ensure we get a good spread of representation on the commission.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) for securing this urgent question.

Once again, this Prime Minister is not for turning up, and nor is the Education Secretary. No wonder the former chair of the commission said that No. 10 was no longer listening. Perhaps the Minister can actually answer the questions the chair raised in his resignation letter. Are the Government really committed to the commission as an independent body? Although they have just put on record their commitment, what do they see as the commission’s role, and what will its remit be now? How much funding will the commission have? Can the Minister confirm that, in the year since the commission’s 2016 report, the Government have not adopted a single one of its recommendations? Did the commissioners raise that with Ministers before resigning? The report said that Britain had a “deep social mobility problem” and “an unfair education system, a two-tier labour market, an imbalanced economy and an unaffordable housing market.”

What are the Government actually doing about that, and was that a factor in the resignations?

On the labour market, the Prime Minister made a defining speech on insecure jobs—she has been developing an expertise in that issue lately—but whatever happened to the Taylor review? In education, has the Minister seen the commission’s findings on the teaching workforce, early years and kids in care, who are still denied the 30-hours entitlement? Has he listened to the commission’s recommendations on housing, regional transport infrastructure and the need for rebalanced investment to create more decent jobs across the country?

When a former Tory Education Secretary resigns from a Tory Government commission, we know this goes well beyond party politics. In his resignation letter, the chair of the commission said the commissioners were resigning because he had “little hope” of the current Government building a fairer Britain. If their own commission has little faith in this Government, why should the rest of us?

Mr Goodwill: I am happy to answer this question on behalf of the Department, as the Minister for Children and Families and also as the Minister responsible for the opportunity areas, which demonstrate our real commitment to tackling social mobility in the coldspots, as laid out by the commission itself.

The hon. Lady asked, are the Government really committed to this commission? The answer is yes, absolutely. She asked about the role of the commission. That will not change; indeed, I pay tribute to the commission for its role in ensuring that we get a spread of representation on the commission.

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): Can the Minister confirm when the Government are likely to publish their social mobility strategy, and are there likely to be any changes in the light of what Alan Milburn has said in recent days and of his resignation?

Mr Goodwill: I thank my hon. Friend for the question. We continue to work hard on our social mobility action plan, and we plan to publish it soon.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Alan Milburn is no longer a Member of this House, so he observes the Government from an outside and slightly detached point of view. When he says that this Government are riddled with “indecision, dysfunctionality and a lack of leadership”, I have to say to him that he should see it from where I am standing—it is a lot worse than that. In this country, we are approaching a perfect storm of freezing wages in...
real terms, cuts to benefits in real terms and rising prices—a perfect storm where the poor will pay for the failure of Government policy. So I ask the Minister what assurances we have, given that the Government continue to be obsessed by Brexit, that he will actually listen to any advisers in this policy area who are appointed in the future?

Mr Goodwill: Alan Milburn has advised the Government through his commission over the past five years, and the Government have taken much of his advice on board; when he was publicising his most recent report, he made some very constructive comments. I stand by the record as outlined in the answer to the initial question from the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable): we have made considerable progress but there is much left to be done. The best way of getting families out of poverty is to ensure that they get into the workplace, and we have record levels of employment. The best way to get children the best opportunities in life is to deliver a great education, and we are delivering a better education for more children than ever before in England.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): The Minister is did the Government gainsay it? Namely, why do we not concentrate on the children from the most deprived backgrounds and postcodes, give them an intelligence test at 11 for which they cannot be tutored, and put them in special schools so that they have a rigorous academic education? The schools could be called grammar schools.

Mr Goodwill: As I understand it, that was not one of the suggestions that Alan Milburn made as he was leaving.

Mr Speaker: Order. That question, although delivered with the hon. Gentleman’s customary lucidity, also suffered from the disadvantage of being utterly irrelevant to the question of the resignation of the board. Perhaps we can return to the matter at hand.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Let us take a good, honest, reliable citizen—there are so many to choose from on both sides. I call Peter Kyle.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker—that is an introduction I will struggle to live up to.

Alan Milburn has said that he resigned because of dysfunction in the Government and the lack of implementation. The Minister’s response gives the impression that he resigned because all the work was already done. Once again, can the Minister give us a clear explanation: why did the board resign, from his perspective?

Mr Goodwill: Mr Milburn was told on 22 November that, although the post would be readvertised, he would not be expected to apply. On the resignation, as the hon. Gentleman described it, we were looking to refresh the board and bring some new blood in. I hope that that will give us a good opportunity to improve the functioning of the board. As I say, that is no personal reflection on Alan Milburn or the work he has done—he has been very good over the five years he has done this job. He has held us to account and held our feet to the fire, as the commission was designed to do.

Mr Speaker: I was gently teasing the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) but, needless to say, all Members are honest—that goes without saying.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): Reports produced by the Social Mobility Foundation show that in the past year, east Cambridgeshire has gone up 70 places. While there is still more work to do, does the Minister think that the commission should be proud of this progress?

Mr Goodwill: Absolutely. There are parts of the country where tremendous progress has been made, not least in London, and they have shown the way ahead not only in education but in other areas. I am very optimistic that, as our 12 opportunity areas get into the full implementation stage, we will see improvements in those areas and learn lessons that can be applied elsewhere around the country.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Is the fall in social mobility reported by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation today good reason for the commission to resign, or should the Government be resigning for their failure?
Mr Goodwill: I am certainly aware of the Joseph Rowntree report on relative poverty. I point out to the hon. Gentleman that absolute poverty has fallen by over 300,000 since 2010 and pensioner poverty remains close to historical levels. That is the sort of poverty that affects people in their everyday lives. Perhaps people are not as aware of the measure of relative poverty as they would be of real poverty.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I am very sorry that the board has chosen to resign. The Conservative party has done so much for social mobility; I would consider myself an example from the '80s. When it comes to appointing a new board, could we look at having more than four members to provide a bit more diversity?

Mr Goodwill: My hon. Friend makes a good point. There is no limit on the number of people on the board; indeed, I think it had almost 10 at one time. I hope that the publicity surrounding this question may encourage people to apply to be on the board, because we want a wide cross-section of applications, including perhaps somebody who has not necessarily been in political life but has been involved at the cutting edge in delivering better social mobility solutions.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): The board members have clearly become exasperated by the UK Government’s failure to acknowledge and act on their work on lifting people out of poverty. Does the Joseph Rowntree Foundation report today not highlight and emphasise that?

Mr Goodwill: The Joseph Rowntree report on relative poverty will always reflect changes—for example, in levels of pensions and levels of employment. If we see higher employment or higher levels of pensions, then an unfortunate side effect will be that relative poverty will increase. As I have said, there are now over 300,000 fewer people in absolute poverty, and that is the figure that is more important to them in their everyday lives as they are shopping for Christmas.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): As the new board is formed, one of the key areas of expertise we need is the ability to build on record employment as, for the first time ever, those entering work will continue to get support from their named job coach, helping to unlock their potential to keep their work, increase their hours, increase their pay, and progress within work. Can that be a real priority for a new board member?

Mr Goodwill: There are a number of areas of experience and expertise that we will wish to see from the new board members. This is an opportunity to refresh the board. I look forward to an inspiring chair of the Social Mobility Commission to take forward the work that Alan Milburn has laid the foundations for.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister’s attempt to divert attention from what has happened simply has not worked. Is he embarrassed that according to the Joseph Rowntree report the Government have presided over a record increase in poverty, particularly among young people and pensioners?

Mr Goodwill: Once again, I must repeat that while there are changes in relative poverty, absolute poverty has fallen.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Education is key to improving social mobility, so will the Minister ensure that the new commissioners who are appointed recognise the benefits of, and draw inspiration from, the fact that the proportion of pupils attending good or outstanding schools has increased from 66% in 2010 to 87% today?

Mr Goodwill: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One of the best routes out of poverty—out of the trap that social mobility failures often put people in—is a good education. I am very pleased that we have more good school places than ever before, that more people from underprivileged backgrounds are going to university, and that more people than ever before are taking the other opportunities such as apprenticeships and training.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): In the years I worked in the university sector, a great deal of time was spent going out to schools to encourage pupils from all backgrounds to apply to university. What sort of message does it send when the chair of the commission resigns and says that the Government simply do not have time for social mobility?

Mr Goodwill: That is not the case. Social mobility is absolutely at the top of my priority list, as well as those of the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister. We are absolutely committed to delivering better social mobility in our country. The evidence that I have already given about progress in very many areas, including in university, is testament to that.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Rather than appointing politicians as replacements to the board, is my right hon. Friend keen to consider leading community people who have ground-level experience? I can suggest to him a list of brilliant people who do incredible work in Corby and whom he might want to consider.

Mr Goodwill: Yes, absolutely. I must make it clear that Alan Milburn was told that there would be an open process—in other words, that we were opening up the selection—and he said in his letter that he would not be applying. That is to put on record exactly what happened in that case. I hope that we will get a wide range of applicants, so that we can choose some of the very best and most able to help us in moulding our future policies to improve social mobility.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): Why have the Government not adopted any of the Social Mobility Commission’s recommendations since 2016? How does the Minister expect to attract new commissioners when he ignores the very important work that they do?

Mr Goodwill: We have certainly not ignored the commissioners’ work, and the social mobility index has been a useful tool to help the Government to prioritise how they address the problem. The opportunity areas, some of which were announced in September and more of which will be announced in the new year, are precisely targeted at the areas identified by the Social Mobility Commission in its “cold spot” programme.
Mr Goodwill: The recruitment process will commence as soon as possible and will ensure that we get the best people to advise us and the House on the progress that we continue to make. As I say, the situation has improved since 2010, and we are ensuring that it continues to improve.

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): With all the board members of the Social Mobility Commission resigning, and with a new report released today by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation showing that the number of lone-parent families in poverty has increased by 5% since 2010-11, does the Minister agree that the Government’s ambition for social mobility has failed?

Mr Goodwill: Our 30 hours’ free childcare offer is available to lone parents, who need to earn only about £6,500 a year to qualify. That is a great opportunity for lone parents to get into the workplace, to start putting some money into the family budget and to get themselves and their families out of the difficult financial situations in which they may find themselves.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): The former commission was valued across the political spectrum for its independent advice. Can the Minister assure us that in contrast to Norwich’s social mobility opportunity board, where a crony has been appointed, he will consider allowing a Select Committee to appoint someone to this public position?

Mr Goodwill: I had thought that the hon. Gentleman was better than that. I think we have some great people on the board in Norwich, and I look forward to working with them to provide better opportunities for people in Norwich.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Minister is a plain-speaking Yorkshireman. Could he use those attributes to explain why he thinks the whole board resigned?

Mr Goodwill: As I have made clear, we need to refresh the board. The board have been very effective, but earlier in the year we had a recruitment round, at which we did not feel we had the right calibre of new people coming in. I think this is a great opportunity to get some new blood on to the commission and make sure that it carries on the work started by Alan and his board, so that we continue to identify the challenges of social mobility and the best ways of addressing them.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): If everything the Minister says is true, why was Gillian Shephard, a Conservative member of the board, absolutely livid about the way in which the Government have treated the commission?

Mr Goodwill: I cannot speak for my right hon. Friend, but as I have said, we now have an opportunity to get some new people on to the board. A number of the existing members had been long-standing members of the board, and although I recognise the contribution they have made, a refresh that brings in new people will provide a good opportunity to increase the body’s diversity and experience.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Will the Minister confirm whether he or the Education Secretary has had the chance to speak to any members of the board since their resignation and to establish whether the wholesale closure of our children’s centres across the country, including the 25 in Warwickshire, contributed to their resignations?

Mr Goodwill: The Secretary of State spoke to Alan Milburn on 22 November. I understand that the other members who have tendered their resignations have written letters; they have not made them public, which I think is interesting.

Certainly one of the challenges for local authorities is how they deliver good services for children, and having children’s centres is one way of doing so. If I may say so, when I was at the children’s centre in my constituency, the lady in charge looked out of the window and said, “Of course, the real problem is that the kids we need in this children’s centre aren’t here; they are stuck at home because their parents won’t bring them in.” There are a number of initiatives around the country that will demonstrate better solutions for addressing social mobility issues for the most difficult to reach families.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The commissioners who have resigned claim there is a lack of Government seriousness on social mobility, as evidenced by the fact that the millennials are the first generation ever to earn less than the previous generation. Is what pushed the commissioners over the edge the fact that, under this Government, things can only get worse?

Mr Goodwill: The hon. Lady makes quite a political point. I note that the East Anglia Co-op is now selling goods that are past their best-before date, but I do not think this country needs Labour peddling policies that were well past their sell-by date in the 1970s.

Several hon. Members rose—
Points of Order

4.12 pm

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. After incessant briefing for the past two days that the Prime Minister and the Government were close to a deal, it has emerged in the past few seconds that she is going to come home empty-handed, with no deal. This shambles puts into perspective the constitutional settlement for our country, so can we expect her to make a statement tomorrow?

Mr Speaker: I am bound to say to the hon. Gentleman that it had very much been my expectation that there would be no event to make any announcement to this House this week. Although I cannot predict this with certainty, I had anticipated and been given reason to believe that it was likely to be tomorrow. The appetite of the hon. Gentleman will be at least partly satisfied ere long, and I expect to see him in his place and springing up from it with alacrity in a desire to contribute to our proceedings.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I am saving up the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes); it would be a pity to squander him too early. I call David T. C. Davies.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. The news is actually that Junker is confident there will be a deal next week. Is it not wrong to say that the Prime Minister is coming back empty-handed when there is almost certainly going to be a deal? Is it not the Europeans who are going to be empty-handed if they do not get their hands on our £50 billion?

Mr Speaker: That underlines the importance of not jumping the gun. I understand the hon. Gentleman's impatience, but we must not allow this to become a spat between people who want to say that all is well and those who want to say that all is ill. I simply invite the House to be a little patient: these matters will be addressed between people who want to say that all is well and those who want to say that all is ill. I hope that Members will accept that on the basis that they do not have to look into the crystal ball when they can read the book. I say this, I hope, in no spirit of immodesty. I run statements in this place more fully than used to be done in the past, and I do that because I think that the priority is for Members of the House to have the opportunity to question and challenge the Executive, even if now and again the Executive find that irritating. That does not bother me at all. I always try to put the House first, so worry not. Everyone will get a chance to be heard.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You will no doubt have seen the extensive coverage that the Government secured yesterday on the front pages of various newspapers, and in a number of interviews on political programmes and on the radio with both the Secretary of State for Health and the Secretary of State for Education, about the launch of the Green Paper on young people’s mental health, including an announcement of £300 million. The 50-page Green Paper has been published today, accompanied by a brief written statement. Have your good offices been made aware of any intention by the Government to make an oral statement to the House about this announcement? If not, is it in order for the Government to make announcements to the press about how they intend to address our nation’s mental health crisis and for us then not to get the chance to properly scrutinise or debate it in this House?

Mr Speaker: I understand the hon. Lady’s sense of frustration about this matter, in view of her long-standing and deep interest in the subject. Nothing disorderly has occurred. It is quite commonplace for Government to issue Green Papers, and they are not necessarily accompanied by oral statements. In this instance, a written statement has been issued. I understand that that might not satisfy the hon. Lady’s palate, if I can put it that way. Moreover, I have to make judgments, as she knows, about urgent question applications, to which she has not referred, quite properly, on the basis of overall levels of demand on other subjects and in the light of time constraints. It may be that the Government will be sufficiently moved to want to make an oral statement about their planned expansion of mental health services for young people. If, however, that proves not to be the case, or the hon. Lady has reason to suspect that it will not be the case and she wishes to return to the matter, it is open to her to try to do so by one or other means.
European Union (Withdrawal) Bill

[4TH ALLOTED DAY]


Further considered in Committee.

[MRS ELEANOR LAING IN THE CHAIR]

New Clause 64

“Creation of UK-wide frameworks

“(1) The Secretary of State must lay before each House of Parliament proposals for replacing European frameworks with UK ones.

(2) UK-wide frameworks shall be proposed if and only if they are necessary to—

(a) enable the functioning of the UK internal market;
(b) ensure compliance with international obligations;
(c) enable the UK can negotiate, enter into and implement new trade agreements and international treaties;
(d) enable the management of common resources;
(e) administer and provide access to justice in cases with a cross-border element;
(f) safeguard the security of the UK.

(3) Ministers of the Crown shall only create UK-wide frameworks if they have consulted with, and secured the agreement of, the affected devolved administrations.”—[Jenny Chapman.]

This new clause would establish new procedures for the creation of UK-wide frameworks for retained EU law.

Brought up, and read the First time.

4.18 pm

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

That the clause be read a Second time.

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Mrs Eleanor Laing): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

New clause 65—Role of Joint Ministerial Committee—

“(1) The Joint Ministerial Committee is to be a forum—

(a) for discussing—

(i) the terms upon which the United Kingdom is to withdraw from the European Union and the United Kingdom’s future relationship with the European Union;
(ii) proposals to amend retained EU law;
(iii) agreed legal and policy frameworks in relation to the subject matter of devolved retained EU law that are to operate throughout the United Kingdom;
(iv) a concordat setting out the process for concluding the legal and policy frameworks mentioned in sub-paragraph (iii); and

(b) for seeking a consensus on those matters between Her Majesty’s Government and the other members of the Joint Ministerial Committee.

(2) Before Her Majesty’s Government concludes a withdrawal agreement, the Secretary of State must produce a document for consideration by the Joint Ministerial Committee setting out—

(a) Her Majesty’s Government’s objectives and strategy in negotiating and concluding a withdrawal agreement;
(b) Her Majesty’s Government’s objectives and strategy in relation to establishing a framework for the United Kingdom’s future relationship with the European Union;
(c) the steps Her Majesty’s Government intends to take to keep the Joint Ministerial Committee informed of progress in reaching a withdrawal agreement;
(d) the steps Her Majesty’s Government intends to take to consult each member of the Joint Ministerial Committee before entering into a withdrawal agreement and for taking the views of each member into account;
(e) the steps Her Majesty’s Government intends to take to seek the approval of the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales and the Northern Ireland Assembly before entering into a withdrawal agreement.

(3) Until a withdrawal agreement is concluded, the Secretary of State must produce a report every three months for consideration by the Joint Ministerial Committee setting out—

(a) Her Majesty’s Government’s assessment of the progress made against Her Majesty’s Government’s objectives—

(i) in negotiating and concluding the withdrawal agreement;
(ii) in relation to establishing a framework for the United Kingdom’s future relationship with the European Union;
(b) any change to the matters listed in paragraphs (a) to (e) of subsection (2).

(4) Before concluding a withdrawal agreement the Prime Minister must produce a document setting out the terms of the proposed agreement for consideration by the Joint Ministerial Committee.

(5) Meetings of the Joint Ministerial Committee must, until Her Majesty’s Government concludes a withdrawal agreement, be chaired by—

(a) the Prime Minister, or
(b) the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union.

(6) In this section, “the Joint Ministerial Committee” means the body set up in accordance with Supplementary Agreement A of the Memorandum of Understanding on Devolution, between Her Majesty’s Government, the Scottish Government, the Welsh Government and the Northern Ireland Executive Committee.”

This new clause would put the Joint Ministerial Committee’s role in the withdrawal process on a statutory footing.

Amendment 42, in clause 11, page 7, line 16, leave out subsections (1) to (3) and insert—

“(1) In section 29(2)(d) of the Scotland Act 1998 (no competence for Scottish Parliament to legislate incompatibly with EU law), omit ‘or with EU law’.

(2) In section 108A(2)(e) of the Government of Wales Act 2006 (no competence for National Assembly for Wales to legislate incompatibly with EU law), omit ‘or with EU law’.

(3) In section 6(2)(d) of the Northern Ireland Act (no competency for the Assembly to legislate incompatibly with EU law, omit ‘is incompatible with EU law’.

This amendment removes the Bill’s proposed restrictions on the ability of the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales and the Northern Ireland Assembly to legislate on devolved matters.

Amendment 164, page 7, line 16, leave out subsections (1) and (2) and insert—

“(1) In section 29(2)(d) of the Scotland Act 1998 (no competence for Scottish Parliament to legislate incompatibly with EU law), omit ‘or with EU law’.
(2) In section 108A(2)(e) of the Government of Wales Act 2006 (no competence for National Assembly for Wales to legislate incompatibly with EU law), omit ‘or with EU law’.

This amendment would replace the Bill’s changes to the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales in consequence of EU withdrawal, by removing the restriction on legislative competence relating to EU law and ensuring that no further restriction relating to retained EU law is imposed.

Amendment 132, page 7, line 19, leave out from “law”) to end of line 29 and insert
“omit ‘or with EU law’”.

This amendment is intended to remove the proposed bar on the Scottish Parliament legislating inconsistently with EU law after exit day.

Amendment 90, page 7, leave out lines 22 to 29 and insert
““(4A) An Act of the Scottish Parliament cannot modify, or confer power by subordinate legislation to modify, retained EU law which relates to matters specified in Schedule 5 to the Scotland Act 1998.””

This amendment would remove the restrictions on the Scottish Parliament modifying retained EU law except in relation to matters that are reserved.

Amendment 133, page 7, line 33, leave out from “law) to end of line 7 on page 8 and insert
“omit ‘or with EU law’”.

This amendment is intended to remove the proposed bar on the National Assembly for Wales legislating inconsistently with EU law.

Amendment 91, page 7, leave out from beginning of line 36 to the end of line 7 on page 8 and insert
“(8) An Act of the Assembly cannot modify, or confer power by subordinate legislation to modify, retained EU law which relates to matters specified in Schedule 7A to the Government of Wales Act 2006.””

This amendment would remove the restrictions on the National Assembly for Wales modifying retained EU law except in relation to matters that are reserved.

Amendment 134, page 8, line 9, leave out from “Assembly)” to end of line 28 and insert “omit subsection 2(d)”.

This amendment is intended to remove the proposed bar on the Northern Ireland Assembly legislating inconsistently with EU law.

Amendment 92, page 8, leave out lines 14 to 28 and insert
“(6) An Act of the Assembly cannot modify, or confer power by subordinate legislation to modify, retained EU law which relates to matters specified in Schedules 2 or 3 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.””

This amendment would remove the restrictions on the Northern Ireland Assembly modifying retained EU law except in relation to matters that are reserved or excepted.

Amendment 72, page 8, line 28, at end insert—
“(3A) This section shall not come into effect until—
(a) the Scottish Parliament has passed a resolution approving the provisions in subsection (1);
(b) the National Assembly for Wales has passed a resolution approving the provisions in subsection (2); and
(c) the Northern Ireland Assembly has passed a resolution approving the provisions in subsection (3).”

Amendment 337, page 8, line 33, at end insert—
“(6) Subsections (1), (2) and (3) shall not come into force until the exit day appointed for the purpose of this section, which must not be before the end of any transitional period agreed under Article 50 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union.”

This amendment, alongside Amendment 42 and NC64, would establish the UK Government has until the end of transitional arrangements to create any UK-wide frameworks.

Clause 11 stand part.

Amendment 165, in schedule 3, page 25, line 37, leave out paragraphs 1 and 2 and insert—
“1 In section 57(2) of the Scotland Act 1998 (no power for members of the Scottish Government to make subordinate legislation, or otherwise act, incompatibly with EU law or Convention rights), omit ‘or with EU law’.

2 In the Government of Wales Act 2006, omit section 80 (EU law).”

This amendment would replace the Bill’s changes to the executive competence of the Scottish Ministers and Welsh Ministers in consequence of withdrawal from the EU, by removing the restriction on competence relating to EU law and ensuring that no further restriction relating to retained EU law is imposed.

Amendment 183, page 28, line 2, leave out from first “and” to end of line 3.

This consequential amendment, linked to Amendments 164 and 165 to Clause 11 and Schedule 3, would change a heading in the Scotland Act 1998 to remove a reference to retained EU law.

Amendment 184, page 28, line 38, leave out from “(d)” to end of line 39 and insert
“omit ‘or with EU law’”.

This consequential amendment, linked to Amendments 164 and 165 to Clause 11 and Schedule 3, would change the definition of devolution issues in the Scotland Act 1998.

Amendment 185, page 29, line 5, leave out paragraph 21.

This consequential amendment, linked to Amendments 164 and 165 to Clause 11 and Schedule 3, would enable changes to the procedure for subordinate legislation in the Scotland Act 1998.

Amendment 186, page 29, line 28, leave out from “subsection” to end of line 29 and insert “(4), omit paragraph (d)”.

This amendment makes a change consequential on Amendment 165, which would omit section 80 of the Government of Wales Act 2006, making section 58A (4)/(d) of that Act redundant.

Amendment 187, page 30, line 4, leave out “before ‘EU’ insert ‘Retained’” and insert “omit ‘EU law’”.

Amendment 165 omits section 80 of the Government of Wales Act 2006. This amendment would amend the changes made to the heading before section 80 to reflect the omission of section 80 of the Government of Wales Act 2006.

Amendment 188, page 30, line 5, leave out paragraph 31.

This amendment makes a change consequential on Amendment 165, which would omit section 80 of the Government of Wales Act 2006, making paragraph 31 of Schedule 3 in this Bill redundant.

That schedule 3 be the Third schedule to the Bill.

Amendment 177, in schedule 2, page 19, line 47, leave out “and retained EU law”.

This is a consequential amendment linked to Amendments 164 and 165 to Clause 11 and Schedule 3.
Amendment 178, page 20, line 23, leave out “and retained EU law”.
This is a consequential amendment linked to Amendments 164 and 165 to Clause 11 and Schedule 3.

Amendment 179, page 23, line 21, leave out “and retained EU law”.
This is a consequential amendment linked to amendments 164 and 165 to Clause 11 and Schedule 3.

Amendment 180, page 23, line 25, leave out “and section 57(4) and (5) of that Act”.
This is a consequential amendment linked to amendments 164 and 165 to Clause 11 and Schedule 3.

Amendment 181, page 23, line 31, leave out “and retained EU law”.
This is a consequential amendment linked to amendments 164 and 165 to Clause 11 and Schedule 3.

Amendment 182, page 23, line 35, leave out “80(8)” and insert “80”.
This consequential amendment, linked to amendments 164 and 165 to Clause 11 and Schedule 3, changes the reference to section 80 of the Government of Wales Act 2006 to make clear that the restriction on the powers of the Welsh Ministers not to act or legislate incompatibly with EU law is removed.

Amendment 189, in schedule 8, page 50, line 19, leave out “section 57(4) of the Scotland Act 1998, section 80(8) of the Government of Wales Act 2006 or”.
This amendment and Amendment 190 are in consequence of Amendment 165 as no restriction relating to retained EU law on the making of subordinate legislation by the Scottish Ministers and the Welsh Ministers would apply.

Amendment 190, page 51, line 1, leave out “section 57(4) of the Scotland Act 1998, section 80(8) of the Government of Wales Act 2006 or”.
This amendment and Amendment 189 are in consequence of Amendment 165 to Schedule 3 as no restriction relating to retained EU law on the making of subordinate legislation by the Scottish Ministers and the Welsh Ministers will apply.

Amendment 191, page 55, leave out lines 8 to 13 and insert—

(a) in paragraph (a), omit sub-paragraph (ii), and
(b) in paragraph (b), omit “or with EU law”.
This amendment would amend the Criminal Procedure (Scotland) Act 1995 on the right of the Advocate General to take part in proceedings in consequence of removing the restriction on the competence of the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Government by Amendments 164 and 165 to Clause 11 and Schedule 3.

Amendment 192, page 59, leave out lines 10 to 16.
This amendment, with Amendments 193, 194 and 195, is in consequence of Amendments 164 and 165 to Clause 11 and Schedule 3 which would remove the powers to make an Order in Council to adjust the new restriction on the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales.

Amendment 193, page 59, leave out lines 23 to 29.
This amendment, with Amendments 192, 194 and 195, is in consequence of Amendments 164 and 165 to Clause 11 and Schedule 3 which would remove the powers to make an Order in Council to adjust the new restriction on the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales.

Amendment 194, page 59, line 47, leave out from beginning to end of line 8 on page 60.
This amendment, with Amendments 192, 193 and 195, is in consequence of Amendments 164 and 165 to Clause 11 and Schedule 3 which would remove the powers to make an Order in Council to adjust the new restriction on the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales.

Amendment 195, page 60, leave out lines 13 to 23.
This amendment, with Amendments 192, 193 and 194, is in consequence of Amendments 164 and 165 to Clause 11 and Schedule 3 which would remove the powers to make an Order in Council to adjust the new restriction on the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales.

Jenny Chapman: It is a pleasure to serve under your guidance, Mrs Laing. I will speak to new clauses 64 and 65, as well as to amendments 42 and 337, which stand in my name and those of my right hon. and hon. Friends.

New clause 64 would establish a collaborative procedure for the creation of UK-wide frameworks. It would require that the Secretary of State must lay before each House proposals for replacing European frameworks with UK ones. We need those frameworks to enable the functioning of the UK internal market; to ensure compliance with international obligations; to ensure the UK can negotiate and enter into international treaties, or, if we leave the customs union, trade agreements; to enable the management of common resources; to administer and provide access to justice in cases with a cross-border element; and to safeguard the security of the UK. The frameworks will have a significant impact on the carefully constructed devolution settlements in the Union. They must be created in collaboration with the devolved Administrations.

The birth of devolved Governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland was a significant change to the running of the United Kingdom. The then Scottish Secretary, Donald Dewar, battled to extract powers from Whitehall mandarins, who attempted to cling on to them. Then, as now, the default position of Whitehall is to hold on to power whenever possible. There are those who believe that this pro-Whitehall centralising tendency, on display yet again in clause 11, is evidence of the “Tories’ reluctance to engage with devolved Administrations, or, even worse, that it signals a persistence of their initial opposition to devolution as a point of principle.

I am pleased to say that I am not one of those people. I believe we have come a long way since 1997, thanks in large part to the persistence of Donald Dewar and others. I sense that the Government’s decision to withhold retained EU powers in Whitehall is not an anti-devolution stance, but instead one of the clearest indications yet that the Government are just not coping with the task of Brexit. The Government simply have not had the mindset to engage with devolved Governments for the creation of UK-wide frameworks. It would enable the management of common resources; to administer or, if we leave the customs union, trade agreements; to ensure compliance with international obligations; to ensure the security of the UK. The frameworks will have a significant impact on the carefully constructed devolution settlements in the Union. They must be created in collaboration with the devolved Administrations.

I encourage Ministers to listen very carefully to what my hon. Friend says. Like me, he has a deep concern about what clause 11 may mean for the
devolved Administrations. We watch with alarm the statements being made today. We hope the position is clarified very quickly.

**Mike Gapes** (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend refers to Donald Dewar. The basis for the devolution process came about via referendums in Scotland, Wales and both parts of Ireland to agree the frameworks under which we now operate. Is it therefore not a contempt, an insult, to the people as a whole—not just this House—for the Government to undermine the Good Friday agreement and the devolution settlement, which was endorsed by the people in referendums?

**Jenny Chapman**: My hon. Friend is right. People voted for these powers to be devolved and it is wrong for the Government to attempt to use Brexit as an excuse to bring them back to London.

The historian Professor Tom Devine called Scottish devolution and the establishment of the Scottish Parliament “the most significant development in Scottish political history since the union of 1707.”

The Conservative party may have been opposed to devolution in the 1990s, and the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish Administrations may not have been conceived of in the early ’70s, but they are now an important and respected integral part of the constitutional architecture of our country.

The Good Friday agreement could never have succeeded without devolution to Northern Ireland, and, in the view of many of those involved at that time, the fact that devolution to Scotland and Wales took place at the same time as the Good Friday negotiations helped to ease some misgivings about the process.

Two nations of our Union voted to remain in the EU and two voted to leave. Our nations are run by different parties with different views about what Britain should look like after Brexit. The challenge for the Government therefore is significant. Just because it is challenging, however, does not mean the Government should attempt to take shortcuts that undermine the credibility, autonomy or sharing of decision making that are now an accepted feature of our democracy.

**Ian Murray** (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for all her work on the Bill. Is she surprised, as I am, that the 12 new Scottish Conservative Members of Parliament were sent here by the Scottish Conservative leader, Ruth Davidson, under the banner of standing up for Scotland, yet it appears that, with the Conservative leader, Ruth Davidson, under the banner of the new group of Conservative Tory MPs, but we shall see if they live up to the billing she has given them.

Whether they want to or not, the Government must adapt to the very different constitutional circumstances that now exist. They are very different from those that existed before 1973. Clause 11, which is intolerable to the devolved Administrations, sets it as the default that powers currently exercised in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast within EU frameworks will be ripped away and held in London. First Ministers are calling this a Whitehall power grab.

**Lucy Frazer** (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): The hon. Lady is making a passionate speech, but does she accept that powers are not being ripped away, given that they are not there for the devolved Administrations at the moment? [Interruption.] Whether hon. Members think it right or not, as a matter of law those powers are vested in the EU, so if they come back to the devolved Administrations, they will be additional powers. Powers are not being taken away.

**Jenny Chapman**: I think that the hon. and learned Lady has not—if I may be polite—quite grasped what we are talking about. We are talking about a framework, within which the devolved Administrations currently make decisions, that is held now at the EU level. Our desire is for a UK framework that enables those decisions to continue to be made by the devolved Administrations. It is very different from saying, as I anticipate some Government Back Benchers will claim, “Well, the powers are currently held in Brussels, so why is everybody so worried about it?” Actually, the decision making is held in Belfast, Edinburgh and Cardiff.

**Susan Elan Jones** (Clwyd South) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that in Wales devolution actually came in two tranches—in 1997, but also in 2011, when Wales voted overwhelmingly for full law-making powers—and that any rolling back of those powers would be simply unacceptable and anti-Welsh in the extreme?

**Jenny Chapman**: I would never wish to be accused of being anti-Welsh.

**Vernon Coaker** (Gedling) (Lab): My hon. Friend is talking about the UK framework and the devolved Administrations. Would she care to comment on the quite astonishing scenes we have witnessed today? It is apparent that the Government have not spoken to the Northern Ireland First Minister about what should happen with respect to any deal. If we are to have special arrangements—or special alignment—between Northern Ireland and the rest of Ireland, what is wrong with giving the whole UK that special alignment? It is called all of us staying in the customs union.

**Jenny Chapman**: My hon. Friend is highlighting the alarm with which we are witnessing the statements coming out today—the confusion, the briefing, the counter-briefing—and with which we contemplate the destabilisation, particularly in Northern Ireland, that could result. We are deeply concerned about it. I will resist making any specific comment until we have a much clearer picture of the situation, but I am sure that every Member will want to ensure that the negotiations proceed this week and that there is a clearer outcome. The Prime Minister has asked for that to happen at the end of the week. We are expecting a full statement tomorrow, and we look forward to it. I am sure that some very serious questions will be asked of the Prime Minister tomorrow about the conduct of the negotiations.
4.30 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Is there not a really important point that the Government seem to forget? When they are negotiating about a border, or no border, or about divergence from or convergence with a regulatory framework on the island of Ireland, they must speak to the First Minister of Wales as well, because the vast majority of the exports from Ireland into the rest of the European Union go through Wales. There is no point in coming up with a Bill that simply ignores the devolved Administrations.

Jenny Chapman: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the fact that the Government seem to have acted in a rather high-handed way with all the devolved Administrations on a matter that is so fundamental to the future of the citizens of this country.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): I agree with the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). The other border between the United Kingdom and Ireland is the one that passes through Holyhead and Fishguard. When I asked the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, in the Select Committee, what consideration he had given to the position in Holyhead in particular—given the chaotic road across the island, the two insubstantial bridges, and the extra traffic from the proposed Wylfa B power station—his answer he gave was very clear: “None.”

Jenny Chapman: That is shocking. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman and other colleagues from Wales will continue to make the point as the debate proceeds. Needless to say, the Government’s attitude has been most concerning to me and to First Ministers, because it suggests that they are not interested in the needs and ambitions of the people of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. That approach is regrettable, but it is not too late to change it.

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend is being very generous in giving way. Just last week, senior border immigration officials told the Home Affairs Committee that the implications for the Welsh ports of Holyhead, Fishguard and Pembroke, which other Members have mentioned, are very serious in practical terms unless we remain in the customs union, for instance. That underlines the point that my hon. Friend is making about proper frameworks, the Joint Ministerial Committee and so on, and the points made in the new clauses and amendments.

Jenny Chapman: I could not agree more.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The hon. Lady is making a persuasive speech. She mentioned the renowned Scottish historian Sir Tom Devine. He, of course, has made the journey from being a supporter of devolution to being a supporter of independence. Does the hon. Lady agree that the Bill is allowed to drive a coach and horses through the current devolution settlement, a great many more Scots are likely to follow Sir Tom Devine by becoming supporters of independence rather than devolution?

Jenny Chapman: I sincerely hope that that will not be the outcome, but I have to admire the hon. and learned Lady’s ability to spot an opportunity and take it.

The Government have never argued that these powers need to be in London or that they intend to hold on to them permanently. Rather, it seems that they feel that tackling the undoubted complexities of considering how to make new arrangements with the devolved Administrations post Brexit belongs in the “too difficult” pile—something to be put off until there is more time and there are fewer distractions. However, there are no time limits on when the Government will cease to hoard the powers. While the hard-line Brexiteers on the Back Benches are promised a time and date—for when they will see powers returned from Brussels, the nations of our Union are told to wait indefinitely. The people of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland deserve better from the Government.

The Government agree with Labour and the devolved Administrations that frameworks are needed—I think—and new clause 64 assists them by outlining how that can be achieved. The presumption should be that powers remain devolved as is the case now, and that UK frameworks are created to co-ordinate policy in some areas through negotiation with the devolved Administrations. To do anything else would turn back the clock on devolution—impossible—and cause untold damage to important relationships between Parliaments.

As well as having the motivation and attention to address this issue, the Government need to trust the devolved Administrations. That is why our proposal makes explicit the obligations on each Government and the nature of the frameworks needed. So far, the Government have not exactly shone in their endeavour to develop a UK-wide approach to Brexit, so new clause 65 helps by putting the Joint Ministerial Committee on a statutory footing.

It is important to reflect on the absence of representation from Northern Ireland on the JMC. The suspension of the Executive is deeply regrettable, and permits the neglect of the needs, concerns, ambitions and hopes of the people of Northern Ireland. Their voices must not go unheard at this most critical of moments, but need to be amplified, as it is they who have the most to lose from a chaotic departure from the EU.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): I am following the hon. Lady’s speech carefully. I am also looking very carefully at her new clause, but I do not see how it would resolve the question of what would happen if we set up joint structures and there was disagreement about how they will work. It can, of course, be argued that the Parliament of the United Kingdom is ultimately sovereign, so I think that it is a matter of law that if there is a disagreement, the logjam would ultimately be resolved by this Parliament and the Government in Whitehall having primacy. The question the hon. Lady has to answer is whether the structure she is putting forward would be workable in practice, or if it would just lead to conflict.

Jenny Chapman: The new clause is not intended to cause conflict—we already have a certain degree of conflict between the Administrations—but, rather, to remove that conflict, and to provide a mechanism by which issues can be resolved. Hearteningly, the JMC seems to have started to function rather better than it did when we last went around this particular issue. It has issued statements that explain how it wants these frameworks to be established, so it does not seem to be too much of a leap to write that into the Bill.
The right hon. and learned Gentleman will probably remember our attempt to put the JMC on a statutory footing when we considered the article 50 Bill, but this time the Brexit negotiations are upon us. The Government have lost their majority since our last attempt, so I encourage Ministers to take a more conciliatory approach this time. New clauses 64 and 65 would force the Government to respect both the devolution of decisions, and those who are responsible for taking the decisions.

Ian Murray: Does my hon. Friend agree that the JMC should be producing communiqués that give the public and this House slightly more information? The communiqué published on 16 October merely stated the attendees and apologies, and concluded: “Ministers noted the positive progress being made on consideration of common frameworks”.

Does my hon. Friend agree that we need slightly more information?

Jenny Chapman: I hope that Ministers are listening and taking note.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Do the Welsh First Minister, and indeed the Welsh Cabinet Secretary for these matters, agree with the wording of new clause 64? Given their public comments, I think they would find it very difficult to agree totally with its current drafting.

Jenny Chapman: My understanding is that the answer is yes. We have not worked alone on this—we have worked together with the devolved Administrations—so I am slightly surprised by that question. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman is angling for something. Is he trying to extract something from this that I am unaware of?

Jonathan Edwards: The plight of the First Minister has always been that new UK frameworks have to be made collaboratively in a partnership of equals. The new clause seems to suggest that this would be a matter determined by Westminster, in negotiation with the devolved Governments, but that is a totally different thing.

Jenny Chapman: The intention is that the frameworks would be achieved collaboratively. That is precisely what we are trying to achieve. It is, of course, a matter for the hon. Gentleman if he is trying to force a wedge between me and my hon. Friends and the First Minister, but I do not think he is going to be successful.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): On the point about conflict that was raised by the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), it seems to be the way in which the Bill has been structured that creates the conflict. The Government could have done this differently. They could have said, “You can have all the powers back and we will hold a veto.” The question is about getting agreement on the frameworks when they are necessary. The two new clauses to which my hon. Friend is speaking seem to me—and, I am sure, to many people—to set out a really practical way of bringing the two sides together to get those agreements. That is the route by which we will find a way through this problem.

Jenny Chapman: That is absolutely the approach that we have tried to take. We are trying to be practical, realistic and respectful, and to work collaboratively with the devolved Administrations.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Will the hon. Lady give way on that point?

Jenny Chapman: I believe that the hon. Gentleman is sincere that his intervention will be on that point.

Pete Wishart: Perhaps the hon. Lady requires a note from elsewhere to say that this is not one of the amendments brought forward by the Scottish Government and the Welsh Government. In fact, the new clause says something entirely different. It states that “Ministers of the Crown” would “create UK-wide frameworks”. The Welsh and Scottish Governments want this to be a combined process that involves all the parties.

Jenny Chapman: I understand what the hon. Gentleman is saying, but I think he is dancing on the head of a pin. We want the creation of the frameworks to be done collaboratively by the devolved Administrations and the Government.

Joanna Cherry: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Jenny Chapman: I have already given way quite a lot. If the hon. and learned Lady does not mind, I am going to crack on now. She will have a chance to make her own speech, and I look forward to listening to it.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con) rose—

Jenny Chapman: I will give way one last time, to the former Minister.

Mr Jones: Pursuing the same point, does the hon. Lady not accept that new clause 64(3), having provided that there should be no new frameworks created without the agreement of the devolved Administrations, would be a recipe for chaos, on the basis that if there were no such agreement, it would be impossible to create the frameworks that she seems to acknowledge as so desirable?

Jenny Chapman: The Joint Ministerial Committee said that it wanted frameworks to be created in this way, I think at the time when the right hon. Gentleman was a Minister, so I really do not understand what his objection is today.

We need look no further than Wales to learn of the practical benefits of devolution. It is right that Cardiff should decide the best way to support farmers in Wales, within an agreed framework but according to their needs and priorities. Jobs Growth Wales has so far supported the employment of 17,000 young people using European funding. That decision would not have been possible if the arrangements proposed by the Government had been in place at the time. When I was first elected, the Tories and the Lib Dems scrapped the almost identical future jobs fund in 2010. Such decisions were devolved for good reason, and we will support the devolved Administrations in keeping them. Amendments 42 and 337, alongside new clause 64, would allow the Government until the end of the transitional arrangements to create UK frameworks.
I want to make it clear to the Minister that in tabling these new clauses and amendments, Labour is attempting to assist the Government by enabling the devolved Administrations to be engaged in decisions that have a direct impact on their people. If the Government accept our criticisms and proposed improvements, Ministers will find that they have a less turbulent time in the months ahead. Do the Government really think that it is wise to pass a Bill to which the devolved Administrations are so hostile? Ministers need to focus on negotiating the best possible deal for all the people of the UK, not on embroiling themselves in constitutional rows with Edinburgh and Cardiff.

4.45 pm

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): I first want to pick up on an earlier comment about what Mr Juncker has been saying. If one could get past the headlines of the biased BBC, the reality is that Mr Juncker actually said that enormous progress has been made in the talks. It might be worth listening to what he actually has to say for once instead of listening to all the usual commentators, who are doing their best to undermine the excellent work that has been done by my colleagues in Government.

The hon. Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) was also there for the overwhelming vote for devolution in 1999, and she will surely recall that the Conservative party did not call for a second referendum. We did not threaten to drag the whole thing through the courts to get the judges to overturn the will of the people of Wales. We were not going around pretending that people had changed their minds and saying that we needed to run the whole thing over again. We did not say that we were going to drag the whole thing out and do everything possible to undermine it. In actual fact, Nick Bourne, who was then the leader of the Welsh Conservatives and is now a Member of the other place, sat down with Members of all parties on the National Assembly advisory group and helped to draw up the Assembly’s Standing Orders, most of which are now in place. That is the difference between the Conservative party’s approach when we were on the losing side of a referendum and the approach of the Labour party, the SNP and many others now that they are on the losing side.

The reality is that the change will be called a power grab. I did not hear the phrase used today, but it will be described as a power grab. Of course it is a power grab, and what a wonderful power grab it is, too. We are grabbing powers from Brussels and bringing them back to London. Not only that, but over the next few years—[Interruption.] SNP Members can shout all they like; I am waiting for one of them to intervene.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

David T. C. Davies: I would be delighted.

Peter Grant: Perhaps the reason why the hon. Gentleman’s campaign against the Welsh Assembly in 1999 failed was that the people of Wales voted in 1997. It might have gone better if he had turned up two years earlier. As we are talking about where power ultimately resides, I believe 100% in Scotland’s ancient doctrine that the people are sovereign. Where does he believe ultimate sovereignty over Scotland resides?

David T. C. Davies: As the hon. Gentleman knows, that is for the Scots to decide, and they decided that, for the time being, ultimate sovereignty rests within a United Kingdom Parliament in which the Scots are heavily and well represented, if I may say so. I totally respect that, and I hope he does, too.

A few weeks ago, Scottish National party Members were telling us that we should all support and recognise the referendum result in Catalonia, where a nation decided that it wanted to break out of a union with Spain. I find it ironic that the SNP is saying that we have to recognise referendum results when it happens to agree with the policy but that we should completely ignore referendum results when it does not agree with the policy.

Mike Gapes: The hon. Gentleman cannot compare an unconstitutional referendum in Catalonia, in which only 2 million people took part, with a constitutional referendum in Scotland and Wales organised according to legal procedures.
David T. C. Davies: I am comparing not the two referendums but the reaction to those two referendums. On that point, I am probably on the same side as the hon. Gentleman.

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Gentleman appears to be making light of the powers coming back from the EU. The Welsh and Scottish Governments were promised that the powers would go to those Administrations. The powers cover a huge number of areas. The Scottish Government reckon there are 111 returning powers, and the Welsh Government reckon the figure is 64. A huge number of areas are coming back here, rather than going to where devolved competence exists. While he is at it, will he tell us which way Monmouthshire voted in the EU referendum?

David T. C. Davies: The hon. Gentleman knows the difference between a local authority area and a parliamentary constituency, so he knows there is absolutely no way of telling what the Monmouth constituency did. He will be aware that it was quite close in the Monmouthshire local authority area. Indeed, there was a very small majority in favour of staying in the European Union. He will also be acutely aware, as I am sure is the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), that I represent 10,000 Labour-voting, traditionally working-class voters in Torfaen. I respect those voters, and they voted overwhelmingly to leave the European Union. Some people say I should not listen to such people, but I tell the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) that those people mean as much to me as anyone living in Monmouth. I will represent their views, and they overwhelmingly voted to leave the European Union.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Is not the key point about the referendum not which regions or nations within the United Kingdom family voted one way or another but that we voted as a United Kingdom on the United Kingdom’s membership of the European Union?

David T. C. Davies: Absolutely. My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Of course, the Government’s whole purpose is to ensure there is a single market within the United Kingdom. We cannot have a situation where different nation states within the United Kingdom go off and do their own thing. If that were to happen, we would have exactly the problem that some Opposition Members complain will occur when we leave the European Union. That is what we are about today.

If one judges the Government by their actions, rather than on the words of Opposition Members, one can see that, actually, this Government and this Conservative party have, over and again, given extra powers to the Scottish Parliament, the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Welsh Assembly. Sometimes they have been rather more enthusiastic in doing that than I would choose, but we saw it happen in 2011 and we are about to see a huge tranche of extra powers being handed over to the Welsh Assembly on 1 April 2018. The Conservative party has shown it is very willing to give extra powers to the devolved Parliaments and, to some extent, I suppose I agree with that approach. I sometimes think it is happening a bit too quickly, but it will certainly happen again. So I completely support what the Government are doing here today. They are doing what all those on the other side of the House are calling for: bringing about Brexit in a stable and controlled fashion that allows us to move forward with certainty. It is inevitable that this will lead to further powers going to the devolved Parliaments—it may not happen straightaway, but it will happen. Not one single power is coming back to London as a result of these measures; there is not one single thing that can be done by the Scottish Parliament or the Welsh Assembly today that they will not be able to do once this Bill is passed.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman was a Member of the Welsh Assembly for some considerable time. Is he saying that if he were still there he would not be arguing in Wales, in the Welsh Assembly, for the powers in the 140 distinct policy areas that have devolved responsibility, many of them in relation to the environment, to come back to the Welsh Assembly? Would he be happy for the Westminster Parliament to make those decisions on behalf of Wales?

David T. C. Davies: I can say to the hon. Lady that that is exactly what I am saying to her. May I remind her that in 2003 I had an election leaflet that had the headline “No more powers for the Welsh Assembly” and I was given one of the biggest majorities of anyone in Wales? That is something to think about. So “yes” is the answer to that question.

This Government are doing a superb job. All sorts of people and the commentators will once again be, in the newspapers tomorrow trying to find little reasons to undermine this process. It is quite a complicated process, but I say from the bottom of my heart that I think these Ministers are doing a superb job, and they are being supported not just by their Back Benchers or all those who voted to leave the European Union, but by a majority of people in Wales, who also voted to leave the EU and are not being respected by the Labour party, Plaid Cymru and whatever is left of the Liberal Democrats.

Mrs Moon: More power to them, and I look forward to joining them in the Lobby tonight.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Before I begin, I wish to pay tribute to the former hon. Member for Clydesdale, and for Lanark and Hamilton East, Jimmy Hood, who served this House between 1987 and 2015 and whose sad death we learned of today. I knew Jimmy, having been a constituent of his for a number of years, and I would like to pass on condolences from everyone on our Benches.

I will speak to amendments 72 and 184, which stand in my name and that of my hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins), as well as the remaining amendments standing in the names of Members from these Benches. First, I wish to update the House on the St Andrew’s day meeting in Edinburgh last week, where the Scottish Government and UK Government met to discuss the Bill and its impact on devolution. The talks were constructive and progress was made in some areas, especially on the subject of frameworks, a matter I will come to later in my speech. However, there is a long way to go on this Bill and, as it stands, the Scottish National party cannot and will not support it.

Clause 11 is a bare, naked power grab and it completely undermines the devolution settlements across the United Kingdom. The right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) often speaks about the UK taking back control
from the EU, but this Bill tramples all over the devolved competences of the Parliaments in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast. The Scotland Act 1998, which established the Scottish Parliament, establishes all matters that are reserved. What is happening here is that, without agreement, Westminster is taking back control over matters that are devolved, without having shown due respect and negotiating appropriately with the devolved Administrations.

We are willing to compromise and reach agreement, but we are some distance from that point. The UK Government have failed to see a sense of urgency in concluding an arrangement with the devolved Administrations. Despite our protestations, there was too long a delay in arranging meetings of the JMC, and the Government here in Westminster have to take responsibility for that. Fundamentally, nothing can be agreed until agreement is reached on both frameworks and amendments to the Bill.

The SNP’s amendments seek to remove the power grab and protect Scotland’s devolution settlement. Amendment 72 is a simple and straightforward one.

Stephen Kerr: What are the circumstances in which the right hon. Gentleman would vote for, and what are the changes he would have to see in, clause 11?

Ian Blackford: If the hon. Gentleman bears with me, I will take him through that in my speech.

The fundamental point is that we must protect the interests of the Scottish Parliament. I say to the hon. Gentleman and his friends: are they willing to join us in the Lobby tonight to make sure that we do not have that naked power grab against the interests of the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish people, or will they simply be the poodles of the Prime Minister? Are they going to stand up for Scotland—Ruth Davidson has talked about that—or are they going to fail tonight to stand up for Scotland, which they said they would do when they got here?

5 pm

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that his tone and language in this debate are quite different from what his Ministers say when they come out of their meetings with UK Government officials? We should reflect on the progress that has been made to date, rather than continually try to find a political divide on this most important of issues.

Ian Blackford: Absolutely. When so many people have worked so hard over many generations and many decades to establish the Scottish Parliament, this attack on the competences of the Scottish Parliament by the Government is absolute bare-faced cheek.

The Tory Members of Parliament from Scotland should remember what they said: that they are here to stand up for Scotland. Tonight they have their opportunity. Are they prepared to see this power grab against the Scottish Parliament? Are they going to vote to take powers back from the Scottish Parliament to Westminster? That is the simple choice that Conservative Members of Parliament face tonight.

It is deeply depressing that the UK Government did not even bother to consult the devolved Administrations on the legislation before publishing it. Where is the respect when they cannot even talk to their colleagues in the devolved Administrations as they should do? I am sure that that obvious act would have saved many of the problems and headaches the Government now face over the devolved aspects of the Bill.

Stephen Doughty: I was happy to put my name to amendment 72 because it is not about whether we want this Brexit Bill to go forward or not—a leaver or a remainer could support amendment 72—but about respecting the constitutional settlement and respecting the rights of the Welsh Assembly, the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Scottish Parliament.

Ian Blackford: I am very grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s remarks. He is absolutely correct. Amendment 72 is about protecting the interests not just of the Scottish Parliament and Government, but of the Administrations in Wales and Northern Ireland.

A point was made earlier about where sovereignty lies, but this House has to be very careful about going against the wishes and the democratic institutions that have been established in all the devolved areas. We play with that at our peril. I am delighted that amendment 72 has gathered support across the House. I sincerely hope—I plead with them—that the Scottish Conservatives join us and support it tonight. Let us all stand up with one clear and united voice, defending the interests of the Scottish Parliament. Do that tonight—stand up for Scotland. It is their moment to stand up and defend the devolution settlement.

Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): Can the right hon. Gentleman please tell me one of the 109 powers that is not already implemented at a devolved level?

Ian Blackford: I am not quite sure what the hon. Gentleman is referring to. If he had listened to what the Scottish Government have said, he would know that 111 devolved competences are being interfered with. That is the salient point.

When the Scottish Parliament was established, the Scotland Act 1998 defined matters that were reserved. Those matters that were not reserved were devolved to the Scottish Parliament. Areas such as agriculture, fisheries and the environment are fully devolved. In this Bill, powers over agriculture, fisheries and our environment are being taken back to Westminster. I say with all due respect to the Conservatives: do you want to trample over the powers that the Scottish Parliament has over these areas?
The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I hesitate to interrupt the right hon. Gentleman, but he knows what I am going to say: I am not going to trample over anyone—well hardly anyone—this afternoon. I would be grateful if he addressed the Government as the Government.

Ian Blackford: My sincere apologies, Mrs Laing. You are right to reprimand me, and I apologise. I am talking about the powers that the Government are taking back—the naked power grab that is taking place against the Scottish Government.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): The Secretary of State and the United Kingdom Government have made it absolutely clear that, after Brexit, the Scottish Parliament will be much more powerful than it is today. Despite that the right hon. Gentleman continues to stand and spout those views. That is just not the case. Our job is to protect Scotland’s place within the United Kingdom and within the internal market of the United Kingdom. Can he tell me the value to Scotland of the rest of the UK trade compared with the value to Scotland of trade with the EU?

Ian Blackford: My goodness, that really does demonstrate that they are not getting this. Purely and simply, it is about the powers that are being taken back from the EU that will sit here in Westminster. The Scotland Act is very clear about the areas that are devolved and the areas that are reserved. It comes to this fundamental point: are Conservative Members who have been sent here from Scottish constituencies going to defend the interests of the Scottish Parliament, or are they simply going to go through the Lobby tonight and speak up for London? Are they speaking up for Scotland or for London? That is the question that the Tories face tonight.

Several hon. Members rose—

Ian Blackford: I wish to make some progress. I will happily take interventions later.

By supporting the amendment, the Scottish Conservatives would give power over how this Bill impacts the devolved Administration to the Scottish Parliament. I am sure Conservative Members will agree with their colleagues—and their leader—in the Scottish Parliament that our own Parliament should have the ability to debate and effect clause 11 and vote on its inclusion in the Bill.

Amendment 184 is a consequential amendment linked to amendments 164 and 165, tabled by the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray). The SNP’s amendment 184 would support amendments 164 and 165 in changing the definition of devolution issues in the Scotland Act 1998. The SNP will work with Members across this House when and where we can. Our joint amendments show just how serious we are about sending a strong message to this Government. However, it is with regret that new clauses 64 and 65, in the name of the official Opposition, do not go far enough for us on the SNP Benches. It is a concern that new clause 64 seeks to place the UK Government in control of joint frameworks and does not recognise that they should be joint creations of the two Governments.

New clause 65 grants the JMC only a consultative role. That is not good enough for the so-called “nation of equals”. We now get to the heart of the problem with this clause. The European Union (Withdrawal) Bill represents the biggest threat to the devolved settlement since the Scottish Parliament reconvened in 1999. Clause 11 seeks to restrict the Scottish Parliament’s legislative competence over EU law and aims to keep all the powers coming back from Brussels, which are under the remit of the Scottish Parliament, firmly in the grip of Whitehall officials. The outrageous way in which this legislation was drafted has united the Governments in Scotland and Wales.

After publication of the Bill, the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales published a joint statement warning against this power grab and stating that the Bill does not deliver on the promise to return powers from the EU to the devolved Administrations. That consensus highlights the extent of the problem with the legislation and the extreme power grab facing the devolved Administrations. We want to keep power where it belongs—in the Scottish Parliament.

Douglas Ross: The right hon. Gentleman says that he wants to keep the powers where they are. Does he therefore accept that he is saying that the SNP wants powers to come back from Europe to Scotland, and for Scotland to become independent to shove those powers straight back to Europe again? Those are views that ensured that the people of Moray voted for a Conservative, rather than an SNP, representative this time.

Ian Blackford: I do not appreciate the hon. Gentleman’s tone. We cannot get away from the simple fact that this legislation is trampling over the powers of the Scottish Parliament.

Lucy Frazer: The right hon. Gentleman keeps saying that we are trampling on powers that Scotland has, and I just want to correct him. Regardless of what he thinks of the principle, the position—as a matter of law—is that these powers are now vested in the EU. The Supreme Court said in paragraph 130 of the article 50 case judgment:

“The removal of the EU constraints on withdrawal from the EU Treaties will alter the competence of the devolved institutions unless new legislative constraints are introduced. In the absence of such...restraints, withdrawal from the EU will enhance the devolved competence.”

Is the right hon. Gentleman saying that the Supreme Court is wrong?

Ian Blackford: The simple fact is that the Secretary of State and others have been asked on a number of occasions to name one power—just one—that will come back to the Scottish Parliament, and they have failed to do that. I do not know whether the hon. and learned Lady has ever read the original Scotland Act 1998, but she seems to ignore the fundamental point of all this, which is that the Scotland Act defines what is devolved and what is reserved. The only powers that are reserved are those expressed in the Scotland Act. It excludes fisheries, agriculture and the environment. I would think better of the hon. and learned Lady, who I know has a background in law, if she actually read the relevant documents. She would then understand exactly why people in Scotland and in Wales recognise this legislation for what it is; it is about taking back control.
Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): On that point, does the right hon. Gentleman agree that, if another region of the United Kingdom were offered “regulatory alignment” outwith the rest of the United Kingdom, it would be a real trampling on the rights of the Scottish people and the Scottish Parliament?

Ian Blackford: Indeed, although I am not quite sure what the hon. Gentleman is referring to when he talks about regions, because we always say that this should be about an equality of nations within the family of nations of the United Kingdom. The issue of sovereignty has been raised in that context. We should remind the Committee that, although we often hear about parliamentary sovereignty, that does not apply in Scotland because the legal case that prejudices our position is MacCormick v. the Crown in 1953, which established that parliamentary sovereignty is a purely English concept that has no counterpart in Scottish constitutional history. It is the people of Scotland who are sovereign.

A recent survey by 38 Degrees shows that 62% of Scots want the responsibility over devolved areas currently held by Europe to be transferred straight to the Scottish Parliament. That is the settled will of the people of Scotland.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Blackford: I will give way later.

The Scottish and Welsh Governments have tabled a number of key amendments to the Bill—amendments 164, 165, and 183 to 188—through SNP Members and Labour Members. I am delighted that these amendments have all been selected for debate today, and I will leave my friends to speak to the amendments in their own names. It must be recognised that there is deep disapproval from the devolved Administrations in Cardiff and in Edinburgh about not only how this legislation was drafted, but the extent to which it disrupts the functioning of devolved competences.

During the referendum campaign last year, Scotland was promised all sorts of powers. The Environment Secretary told BBC Scotland that Scotland would get immigration powers with a leave vote. The former Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston promised Scotland powers over fishing and agriculture. But here we are, 17 months after the referendum. There are no new powers for Scotland. In fact, Brexit means Scotland losing powers.

If I may say so, I have sympathy with the point that is being put across—that the way in which the Bill is drafted seems to be excessively stark and to fail to take account of the sensitivities of the devolution settlements. However, I am afraid I cannot join the right hon. Gentleman on the rhetoric, because, ultimately, as a United Kingdom, which is what we are, there has to be flexibility in reaching a sensible way forward in the light of a change in circumstance. If I may gently say so to him, because I participated actively in the debates on the devolution legislation of 1997, it was always acknowledged then that devolution was not just a one-way street; for it to work, we required that flexibility of dialogue between Cardiff, Edinburgh, Belfast and London to reach solutions, not just to get anchored on principles. While I am respectful of the point he is trying to make, I suggest to him that that might be a sensible way forward.

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): At the start of his remarks, the right hon. Gentleman sought to give us feedback from the meeting that I held with the First Minister and Deputy First Minister of Scotland and the Minister responsible for exit. If the right hon. Gentleman had been party to those discussions, he would know that all 111 powers were subject to discussion between the two Governments, and the two Governments will bring forward their proposals in due course. This power grab talk about this naming one power—it is pantomime. What this Government are involved in is the reality of negotiating a way forward on this matter.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Ian Blackford: I can hear Conservative cheering, but what a waste of time that intervention was. The question was very simple: name one power coming back to Scotland. Once again, the Secretary of State for Scotland, who is London’s man in Scotland—far from being Scotland’s man in the Cabinet—was not able to demonstrate that one single power is coming back to us. It is 17 months after the referendum, and we are no further forward. The clock is ticking, and every single power, as things stand, is coming back to Westminster. That is the reality. The Secretary of State, like his colleagues from north of the border, has failed to stand up and protect Scotland’s national interest.

5.15 pm

Paul Masterton: Is the right hon. Gentleman not just demonstrating how out of the loop he is with his own party, given that the Brexit Minister, Mike Russell, knows full well what those discussions have been about? Secondly, is the position of the SNP at Westminster different from that in Holyrood, because the SNP there has said explicitly that it agrees that agriculture and fisheries are areas where UK frameworks will be needed?

Ian Blackford: I am surprised at that intervention from the hon. Gentleman. I expressed right at the outset of my speech that we recognise that progress was made, but that progress has not been sufficient to justify the SNP supporting this Bill tonight. The whole point about our position is that we want to see frameworks in place, but we can move forward on that only when the UK Government are prepared to negotiate. Why was there a six-month period when the Joint Ministerial Committee did not meet? If there is any blame in this matter, it lies with those on the Government Benches.

I can tell the hon. Gentleman that there is not a fag paper between the position of the SNP on these Benches and that of our colleagues up the road in Holyrood. We are united, which is more than can be said of the Conservative party, because Ruth Davidson is delivering a very different message from the one that is being delivered by the Conservatives down here. Ruth Davidson recognises the threat to Scotland of being out of the single market and the customs union. The Scottish Conservatives would serve the interests of the people of Scotland if they recognised that there is an economic threat from being outwith the single market and the customs union.

Mr Grieve: If I may say so, I have sympathy with the point that is being put across—that the way in which the Bill is drafted seems to be excessively stark and to fail to take account of the sensitivities of the devolution settlements. However, I am afraid I cannot join the right hon. Gentleman on the rhetoric, because, ultimately, as a United Kingdom, which is what we are, there has to be flexibility in reaching a sensible way forward in the light of a change in circumstance. If I may gently say so to him, because I participated actively in the debates on the devolution legislation of 1997, it was always acknowledged then that devolution was not just a one-way street; for it to work, we required that flexibility of dialogue between Cardiff, Edinburgh, Belfast and London to reach solutions, not just to get anchored on principles. While I am respectful of the point he is trying to make, I suggest to him that that might be a sensible way forward.
Ian Blackford: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend, if I may call him that, for that intervention. I always listen carefully to what he has to say, and I think that, in some respects, he makes my point. Way back last December, the Scottish Government published a paper about achieving compromise, and that is the position we have always taken. We fully recognise that we have to get to a situation where we can compromise and where we need to have joint frameworks. The nub of this argument is where the powers should lie when they come back from the EU. It would be far better if they came back to the Scottish Parliament, so that we could agree a framework; as it is, the UK has grabbed the powers and is failing to discuss these matters adequately—not just with the Government in Edinburgh, but with the Government in Wales.

The Bill returns powers solely to the UK Government and Parliament, imposing new restrictions on devolved legislatures. Scotland is getting used to Labour and Tory politicians promising all sorts of things during referendums but never delivering them. It is astonishing that just three years ago the Conservative and Labour parties were telling the people of Scotland that the biggest threat to the economy and the citizenship was an independent Scotland—“Vote no to protect the UK’s EU membership!” Let us think about that for a minute. Now we are losing our EU membership. The economy is already seeing the effects, inflation is up and the fall in the pound and living standards has been the consequence.

The reality is that Brexit is making us poorer before it even takes hold. Our prosperity is under threat. Meanwhile, the UK Government are attempting the biggest power grab since 1999.

Ian Murray: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, whose amendments I will support this evening; I believe the SNP will be supporting Labour’s. In that spirit of consensus, may I probe a little further into what he is saying about the independence referendum? I have still to find anyone who supports independence who can explain to me how they think the EU single market is such a good thing but the UK single market is not.

Ian Blackford: The answer is very simple: we would not be leaving the single market of the UK. We are hoping to protect the interests of the people of Scotland. The simple matter in front of us at the moment, as identified by the Fraser of Allander Institute, is that we run the risk of losing 80,000 jobs in Scotland if we are outwith the single market and the customs union. A decline in wages of £2,000 per person—that is the reality of the threat. We are seeking to protect the interests of the people of Scotland.

Ian Murray: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Blackford: I am going to make some progress. The enormity of clause 11 has been highlighted by numerous legal experts. Professor Alan Page noted that the Bill proposes a massive increase in the power of UK Ministers to legislate in the devolved areas. Professor Richard Rawlings noted:

“The sooner clause 11 is cast aside, the better.”

Professor Stephen Tierney has noted a confusion around the Bill, made even more problematic by the fact that the interpretation of devolved competence will become an area of constant fluctuation.

In evidence to the Scottish Parliament’s Finance and Constitution Committee in early November, the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), stated that it was “quite possible” that the clause restricting the Scottish Parliament’s competency would be “substantially reduced”.

We are having this debate today without any action having been taken. I am deeply disappointed that the Government should have found time to table an amendment on the date of Brexit, but have failed to table anything rectifying the mess they have made of clause 11. The House of Lords Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee report even concluded:

“The Order in Council powers in clause 11 and Schedule 3 are inappropriate and should be removed.”

Secretary of State, why has that not happened?

The problem with clause 11 is not just the power grab. The Law Society of Scotland has raised concerns around the modifying of conferring power by subordinate legislation to modify retained EU law. It highlights that it is not clear what Acts of the Scottish Parliament the new provision will apply to. The Bill suggests that the provision is not intended to be retrospective and will apply only to post-exit Acts of the Scottish Parliament. But what exactly is such an Act—an Act enacted on or after exit day? That would mean that legislation would be required to comply with that restriction even if it was introduced months before exit day and even if it had been passed by the Scottish Parliament before exit day.

Following the mounting pressure, lists of questions and growing criticism, the UK Government brought forward a plan of common frameworks. Although we on the Scottish National party Benches recognise that common frameworks that replace EU law across the UK may be needed in some areas, the competence in matters otherwise devolved should revert to the Scottish Parliament. The scope and content of any UK-wide framework must be agreed rather than imposed. That is the fundamental point. We welcome the Secretary of State’s commitment to that principle.

Although the UK Government have indicated that they wish to develop common frameworks, it is not currently clear how policy within those frameworks might be agreed. The Law Society of England and Wales has called for discussions about where common frameworks that replace EU law across the UK may be needed in some areas, the competence in matters otherwise devolved should revert to the Scottish Parliament. The House of Lords Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee report even concluded:

“The Order in Council powers in clause 11 and Schedule 3 are inappropriate and should be removed.”

Secretary of State, why has that not happened?
this policy divergence will not only hold back the progress Scotland has made on environmental matters but prevent any legal measures that aim to deliver phased introductions on any proposal.

The confusion around the effect of clause 11 deepens. When asked multiple times, as I have done, to name just one power that is currently coming back, the Secretary of State has not been able to do so. Yet the Cabinet Office says that “anything” the devolved Administrations “could do before we leave the EU, they will able to do after we leave”.

The truth is that this Bill does not provide for a single new decision-making power for any of the devolved legislatures. Everything goes to London, and it is for London to decide what ultimately happens to these powers. Where is our sovereignty in all this? Where is the sovereignty of the people of Scotland?

The Scottish Government have been clear that there is no way the Scottish Parliament can grant a legislative consent motion until this Bill is drastically dealt with. If no progress is made today on the amendments tabled in the names of Scottish and Welsh Members, there will be no change in that position. Let me make it clear: we do not want to be in the position of not granting a legislative consent motion. We want to do that, but in order for us to do so, the Government have to respect the powers that should sit in the Scottish Parliament. [Interruption.] The hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) is saying, “Really?” We have tried to engage in this process constructively; it would be great if the Conservatives would engage in the same way.

Stephen Doughty: Is the right hon. Gentleman genuinely surprised that there has not been progress on some of the reasonable amendments that have been tabled on a cross-party basis, given that the Secretary of State for Scotland himself said to the Scottish Affairs Committee that “it may be that some amendments can be accepted with a little bit of modification”?

I would have hoped that by this stage the Government would have made more progress on some of the very reasonable amendments that have been tabled.

Ian Blackford: The hon. Gentleman makes an important intervention. We are 17 months on from the vote and we are at a very important stage of this Bill.

We are trying to negotiate on the basis that we recognise the threats that we are facing. It is incumbent on the Government to recognise that we have to get agreement between the Government in London and the Governments in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast. It saddens me that we are having eight hours’ debate today and we have eight hours’ debate on Wednesday, and the Government’s approach just seems to be that they are listening. How long does it take them to listen, and how long does it take them to respond to the fact that they are trampling over the powers of the devolved Administrations? The Government in Edinburgh and SNP Members are making it absolutely crystal clear that we do not want to be in the position of a legislative consent motion being withheld. We want to make sure that we can strengthen this Bill to the advantage of everybody, but we need to get the position from the UK Government that they are prepared to respect the Administrations in Edinburgh, in Belfast and in Cardiff.

Joanna Cherry: There is a lot of scoffing on the Government Benches. Three Committees of this House have heard evidence about clause 11—the Scottish Affairs Committee, the Exiting the European Committee, and the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee—and the weight of that evidence from a number of senior, distinguished lawyers from both north and south of the border has been that there are very real concerns that clause 11 “drives a coach and horses through the devolution settlement”.

Those are not the SNP’s words but the preponderance of evidence heard by Committees of this House.

Ian Blackford: My hon. and learned Friend makes a strong case. That is why the Government should listen to her, and to the other reasonable voices that have spoken this afternoon and at other times. The Government have to recognise that they are playing with the powers that have been established under various Scotland Acts, and that is not right. The evidence is there from academics and from the Select Committees of this House that have made judgments on the matter, and the Government have a responsibility tonight to reflect on it. They must not push the matter into the long grass and say that they are listening; they have to show that they are prepared to take action.

I will sum up, because I know that many others want to speak. With the overwhelming evidence from experts in the legal profession showing how flawed clause 11 is, the best thing the Government can do is to accept that the Bill needs to be fundamentally amended. They can do that this evening, by accepting the joint Scottish and Welsh Government amendments. Common frameworks will not prevent the imminent constitutional crisis that clause 11 will create. The Government must change this Bill.

5.30 pm

Paul Masterton: I am grateful to have the opportunity to speak, as a Scottish Conservative MP and as a member of the Scottish Affairs Committee, on what I believe is being termed devolution day. I draw Members’ attention to the Committee’s—in my biased view—exceptional report, which our Chair, the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), may well highlight at some point. The report was unanimous, and it draws on huge amounts of common ground between Scotland’s two Governments. That suggests that despite some histrionics, consensus exists on this area of the Bill, and that consensus will enable us to improve the Bill.

We must recognise that the debate takes place in the context of active, and now constructive, talks between the UK and the Scottish Government. That makes it little difficult to debate the words on the page, because there are so many moving parts, but I will focus my remarks on where I believe clause 11 needs to end up and the route that the Scottish Conservatives envisage for getting there.

As has been addressed, several provisions of the Bill fall within the scope of the Sewel convention; in other words, the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly have been asked to give their consent to the Bill. The Scottish
and Welsh Governments have signified that, unless the Bill is substantially amended, neither will recommend that consent be given. The UK Government’s position is, I believe, the right one. They are committed to working to obtain a legislative consent motion and expect to achieve one.

As Scottish Conservatives, we are committed to ensuring that the Scottish Parliament can give its consent to the passage of the Bill. As Members may not all be aware of the timescale, I will explain that the plan is for the Scottish Parliament to vote on whether to grant a legislative consent motion ahead of the Third Reading of the Bill in the other place. It is not an all-or-nothing event; it is perfectly possible for an LCM to be initially denied, and then for another vote on granting an LCM to be taken and passed at a later date.

Although, as readers of The Daily Telegraph will be aware, I have a number of issues with the Bill, by far the biggest concern regarding devolution is clause 11. It is my view that if we can fix clause 11, most of the other issues regarding the Bill’s impact on devolution will fall away. On Second Reading, I said that I would not allow legislation to pass that undermined the Union or the devolution settlement, and that remains my position today.

There are 111 powers currently exercised at EU level that do not fall within reserved competence under the Scotland Act 1998 and are therefore, under the scheme of the Act, devolved. Clause 11 will effectively hold Scotland Act 1998 and are therefore, under the scheme of the Act, devolved. Clause 11 will effectively hold

Paul Masterton: I absolutely agree, but I point is that the amendments proposed by the Scottish and Welsh Governments go far too far. There is some middle ground, on which, if the hon. Gentleman will allow me, I will set out where I believe we can get to.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Some of the hon. Gentleman’s Conservative colleagues have proposed their own amendments on other areas of the Bill. Why has the Scottish Conservative group of MPs not tabled any amendments to clause 11 if they share his concern?

Paul Masterton: For the simple reason that there is another JMC meeting on 12 December, and we do not believe it is right to prejudge or prejudice the outcome of those negotiations. There is going to be an agreement, and it is much better to allow such an agreement to be reached and incorporated into the Bill.

Much has been devolved since 1998, but nothing that jeopardises the UK’s single internal market. It would be in the interests of neither consumers nor producers for product safety and consumer protection rules to be different across the nations of the United Kingdom.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Paul Masterton: I am going to make some progress. These rules are now uniform throughout the UK and many, but of course not all, should remain so after Brexit. Amendments 164 and 165 go too far and are dangerous to the Union. Frankly, I am startled that Scottish Labour—only one Scottish Labour MP is here—and Scottish Liberal Democrats are prepared to support these amendments, which could so fatally undermine the integrity of our Union. The Scottish Conservatives will not support them. However, I want to make it clear that my vote with the Government should not and must not be taken as an acceptance of clause 11 as it stands.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I am astonished. Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that continual discord, arguments about the constitution and a perceived threat to the powers of the Scottish Parliament are more of a threat to the United Kingdom than anything proposed in any amendment in Committee today?

Paul Masterton: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, but I do not agree. I think that amendments 164 and 165 are fundamentally dangerous to the Union, and it would be dangerous for the integrity of the Union to pull them into the Bill.
Dr Whitford: Does the hon. Gentleman not accept that the principle of the Scotland Act 1998 was that what was not reserved was devolved? These powers could easily go to the devolved nations, which could then sit around the table. Their voices would then be heard properly in any national framework, and they would not simply be told what it would be.

Paul Masterton: If the hon. Lady was listening, she would have heard me say that I agreed that that was the purpose of the 1998 Act. I am coming on to say explicitly that clause 11, as drafted, is not fit for purpose of the 1998 Act. I am prepared now and are expected to continue to be fruitful negotiations between the UK and Scottish Governments. I am prepared at this stage to give the UK Government the time and opportunity to take forward these matters, on the clear understanding that both sides need to move from where they now are on clause 11. We are beginning to see movement: we can see it in the constructive JMC (EN) talks, the next meeting of which will be on 12 December, and Scottish Conservatives stand ready to help broker a compromise. In our view, the impasse is readily solvable. Most of the 111 powers are technical and regulatory.

Joanna Cherry: I ask the hon. Gentleman to seriously consider what he has just said. He said that most of the 111 powers are technical and regulatory. Is he aware that the list affects huge swathes of our justice system in Scotland? Does he consider our devolved justice system to be simply technical and regulatory? He said that most of the 111 powers are technical and regulatory. Is he aware that the list affects huge swathes of our justice system in Scotland?

David Mundell: They are on the list.

Joanna Cherry: They are on the list. You should read it.

David Mundell: But not in the form you have said.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Order!

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I am always grateful for the help of the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands). Thank you very much. Mr Masterton must have a chance to answer the point made by Ms Cherry before we have any further interventions, although there will probably be another one in a moment.

Paul Masterton: Again, I draw the attention of the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) to the fact that I said that most of the 111 powers are technical and regulatory. They cover areas either where divergence in policy between UK and Scottish Government Ministers would not be a threat to the integrity of the UK internal market, or where consistency could be maintained through non-legislative options. Those powers should be devolved to the Scottish Parliament on exit day, or as close to it as can safely and realistically be achieved.

In respect of those powers where there is a legitimate UK interest in uniformity across the UK—that is, where divergence between the nations of the UK would be contrary to the UK’s interests—it would be unsafe to allow them to be devolved without providing for constraints on how they may be used. It is in those cases that we will need common frameworks to meet our common objective by UK, Scottish and Welsh Ministers. Aspects of agriculture and fisheries are among the examples where it has been accepted that there will be a need for common frameworks.

As confirmed to the Scottish Affairs Committee by the Secretary of State for Scotland, if the frameworks are to be acceptable to the Scottish and Welsh Governments, they will have to be negotiated and agreed, not imposed top down by the UK Government. That suggestion is fairly straightforward. Each of the 111 powers will either fall to be wholly devolved to the Scottish Parliament, or the UK will step into the shoes of the EU, replacing an EU-wide framework with a new UK-wide framework, for which administrative competence will largely rest with the Scottish Parliament.

Although we will not seek to amend clause 11 at this stage, we will, in exchange for supporting the Government on amendments 164 and 165, require confirmation from Ministers that they will expedite discussions with the Scottish Government further. We seek quick progress, looking ahead to the next JMC (EN) in December and into January, and in any event certainly before the debate on Report.

My focus at this stage is very much on the framework negotiations running parallel to this debate, but I ask that the UK Government give me the assurances I seek that they will move forward urgently through the JMC (EN) with, first, identifying and agreeing areas where there is a need for legislative common frameworks; secondly, recognising that the other powers can be devolved immediately on EU exit, including as many of those where non-legislative solutions on maintaining consensus have been agreed; and thirdly, setting how the common frameworks will be agreed. I expect an assurance on the first two issues to be given by the debate on Report, and if the third has not been given by then, I expect clear and significant progress to have been made.

In time, clause 11 will need to be replaced to reflect that, but I recognise that its final form will be linked to the points I have listed, so I do not ask for, or expect, that change to be made now. Looking ahead, once agreement is reached on where frameworks are needed and how they will be agreed, I believe that clause 11 should include a draft default setting, so that the power would be held by UK Ministers until a common framework is agreed. Crucially, however, that default setting could apply only in areas where it was established that there should be a common framework and the mechanisms to reach agreement on a framework have failed.

A lot of work needs to happen between now and then primarily on moving the frameworks on through the JMC (EN). That is why my focus will stay on that for now. I say again, however, that my vote against amendments 164 and 165 tonight is conditional and must not be taken as support for clause 11 as it stands.
Christine Jardine: What action will the hon. Gentleman take if amendments 164 and 165 are not passed and his demands do not come to pass? Would it not be more sensible to just support the amendments?

Paul Masterton: No, because I do not believe that amendments 164 and 165 provide the position in which I think clause 11 could and should end up. I have been very clear—I said this on Second Reading and I have said it again tonight—that I will not support a Bill that undermines devolution and does not respect the integrity of the Union. I do not think I could have been any clearer to Ministers.

I consider my argument to be reasonable, pragmatic, achievable and, crucially, acceptable to both of Scotland’s Governments. There is much at stake. If the steps I have outlined are not completed, the consequences are quite simple: LCMs will not be granted by the devolved Administrations and the other place will not pass the Bill. I genuinely believe that that is not a situation in which any of us want to find ourselves, and I look forward to receiving the necessary assurances from the Minister in his closing remarks.

Ian Murray: I pay tribute to the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) for his contribution. His sensible approach to the Bill shows that, while we may not reach a consensus across the parties on some of these issues, we can make the Bill better, which is why we are here. The dogma with which the Government have approached the UK’s withdrawal from the European Union and the Bill will shape many aspects of how the UK operates for generations to come. I wish that more Members had the attitude of the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire as the Bill goes through Parliament.

The hon. Gentleman wants assurances about amendments 164 and 165, which I tabled, but I say gently that the best way for him to get them would be for him and his colleagues to wander through the Lobby with the Opposition tonight and put the amendments in the Bill. That would ensure that Ministers would get the message that the current drafting of clause 11 is incorrect.

I shall speak to amendments 164, 165, 177 to 181, and 189 to 195, all of which I tabled. I appreciate that many are consequential to my main amendments, 164 and 165, and that a number will be for decision on another day. Amendment 42, which was tabled by my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Opposition Front Bench, is much better drafted than mine—I wish I had said that two weeks ago in the customs union debate. It will probably be the one that is carried as it covers Northern Ireland, which I missed out because of the constitutional difficulties there.

I would like to take a few moments to pay tribute to the former Member for Lanark and Hamilton East, Jimmy Hood, who died last night. We send his wife, Marion, and his wider family all our very best thoughts and wishes in the days to come. Jimmy was a close friend of mine and of this House. He was a great source of advice, and indeed fun, particularly in the Tea Room. Perhaps I should move on to the amendments before I tell any of those stories from the Tea Room, as they may not be over-appropriate for this Chamber.

Two weeks’ ago, in the debate on the Ways and Means motion with regard to the customs union, I put it to the Scottish Conservatives that all Members in this House try their very best to represent the views of their constituents, and of those in our wider geographical areas, including our nations of Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales and England, as well as the wider United Kingdom. The Conservative party’s leader in Scotland trumpeted the outcome of the 2017 general election in Scotland by heralding it as 13 Scottish Conservative Members of Parliament coming to this House to stand up for and to defend the interests of Scotland. In the context of the Bill, the only Scottish Conservative Member to do that so far—he has demonstrated it today and in previous votes—is the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire. One therefore has to ask: are the Scottish Conservative MPs here under the flag of the Scottish Conservative leader, Ruth Davidson, or under the flag of the Whips Office of the UK Government? I suspect it is the latter.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Murray: I will be happy to take the hon. Gentleman’s intervention if he tells us whether he is standing up for the interests of Scotland or the interests of his Chief Whip.

Ross Thomson: That is absolutely the case. That is why there are 13 Scottish Conservative MPs and only seven Scottish Labour Members. Indeed, a number of my colleagues are in their place on the Conservative Benches, whereas the hon. Gentleman seems to be the sole Scottish Labour Member in the Chamber. I think that the Scottish Conservatives are doing well in standing up for Scotland.

Ian Murray: I think the hon. Gentleman has just demonstrated that he will be voting with the UK Government Whips this evening against the wishes of the Scottish people and against the will of the Scottish people expressed in the referendum. When Ruth Davidson is asked about the 13 Scottish MPs, she always says that they are here to fight Scotland’s corner, but it is quite clear that they are not going to fight Scotland’s corner on these clauses.

I wish briefly to mention new clause 65, which relates to the Joint Ministerial Committee. I have long tried in the House to strengthen the case for the JMC. One of the key aspects of the original Smith commission, which was established on a cross-party basis following the independence referendum in 2014, was to strengthen intergovernmental relationships so that such issues could not occur. I was disappointed, however, during our 2015 deliberations on what became the Scotland Act 2016, when the Government rejected our amendments aimed at strengthening that relationship. The conclusion of many commentators is that weak intergovernmental and inter-parliamentary working is causing some of these problems.

In his final report, back in 2014, Lord Smith of Kelvin said:

“Throughout the course of the Commission, the issue of weak inter-governmental working was repeatedly raised as a problem.”

That has been a common thread throughout many of the documents we have seen. The Public Administration
and Constitutional Affairs Committee, which produced a report on clause 11, mentioned at great length how impenetrable and difficult it was even to determine what the JMC was discussing, what its final conclusions were, and when it was meeting. Its meetings are sporadic, and when a committee is private and produces minutes that are very sparse, the politics take over. It is clear that the UK and Scottish Governments, being different colours—blue and yellow—will never agree in the political sphere, so the JMC is diluted to a political argument and unable to achieve what it is trying to achieve.

I intervened on my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman), during her wonderful speech to talk about the minutes of the JMC. The October minute from the JMC was two pages long. One and a half pages dealt with who attended and who provided apologies, and there was then a skeletal explanation of what was discussed and no real conclusions. The JMC has to be put on a statutory footing along with the parameters required to make it transparent to the public and this House. That is why we should support new clause 63, as it would give us some understanding of the processes of the JMC.

We are heading for a constitutional crisis. We have a Conservative party threatening the very fabric of the United Kingdom just after the people of Scotland decided that the UK should stay together. We have the farce of today’s events: first the Prime Minister and the Downing Street spinning that a deal is close; then, with the Prime Minister barely through her soup with Donald Tusk, Downing Street backtracking as quickly as possible from those briefings; and then, with one phone call, the leader of the Democratic Unionist party, who controls the Government—the de facto Prime Minister—pulling the rug from underneath the feet of the Prime Minister, who then turns her back on something that it was thought had been negotiated and agreed.

Mike Gapes: Is my hon. Friend aware that the Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, has said:

“I am surprised and disappointed that the British government now appears not to be in a position to conclude what was agreed earlier.”

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Gentleman might be making an interesting point, but it is not directly relevant to the new clause.

Ian Murray: Thank you, Mrs Laing. If I may, I will respond to what the Taoiseach said just by saying I am surprised that he is disappointed, but not surprised that he is surprised.

Stephen Doughty: With specific reference to the amendments, particularly around the importance of joint ministerial consultation on a number of matters, does my hon. Friend wonder, like me, whether the First Minister of Wales, the First Minister of Scotland and indeed the Mayor of London, whom we have heard speaking out, were in any way consulted on the potential terms that were being offered in the negotiations in Brussels today?

Ian Murray: That is my point about the constitutional crisis we are in. It seems that the only way to follow the discussions between the UK Government and the EU is on Twitter. Journalists seem to know what is happening before hon. Members. We are getting a running commentary from the Government through press releases, but there is absolutely no proper consultation with the devolved Administrations.

Ian Paisley rose—

Ian Murray: I will give way to my friend from the DUP, because I think he might have something interesting to say.

Ian Paisley: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman thinks I might have something interesting to say as I know that he always has something interesting to say. On the general point, I do not think that anybody should get their news constantly from Twitter. Specifically on the amendments, is not the key point that we must show discernment and skill and not fall for the spin, whether that comes out of Dublin, London or Brussels? Let the negotiations run and let us see what comes out of them at the end.

Ian Murray: I could not agree with the hon. Gentleman more, but why not bring some of that to the House, rather than leaving it for commentary on Twitter? Journalists following the Prime Minister seem to know much more about what is happening than anybody in the House. If the Prime Minister were to fly home—Ministers can get back from foreign countries very quickly, as was demonstrated over the summer—come to the House and let us know what was going on, we would not need to stand here and speculate. The hon. Gentleman made an intervention about regulatory harmonisation. I think he let the cat out of the bag when he mentioned that the DUP was firmly against regulatory harmonisation in the island of Ireland, and that is why this is so important across the rest of the UK.

Stephen Doughty: Has my hon. Friend noticed that the Minister who has apparently been briefing Conservative Members has just appeared in the Chamber? Perhaps he could give us some answers about what has been going on in Brussels today.

The First Deputy Chairman: Order. No he cannot. We are discussing new clauses and amendments to the Bill, not what people are seeing on Twitter. If the Prime Minister has anything to report to the House, I am sure that she will come at the earliest opportunity to give such a report.

Ian Murray: I am grateful to you, Mrs Laing. I apologise to the Committee for digressing, but these are incredibly important matters—and actually they are directly connected to my amendments, because they about keeping the devolved Administrations informed and involved in the process.

The hon. Member for East Renfrewshire said he was seeking reassurances. What we have seen since lunch time should give him cause for concern that no assurances will be forthcoming, which is why we must put in the Bill the requirement that the Government keep the devolved Administrations properly informed. This is about not just the devolved Administrations, but the people they represent.

Paul Masterton: Does the hon. Gentleman not accept that his amendments would allow every single one of the 111 powers to be immediately devolved from day
one, with no constraints, and that they would therefore enable all the devolved Administrations to do whatever they wanted, meaning that we could have divergence from day one? He believes in continuity and maintaining similarities between the four components of the UK. Does he not understand why his amendments would be dangerous to the integrity of the UK’s internal market, given that from day one the four component parts of the UK could go off and do whatever they wanted?

*Ian Murray:* I will answer that directly when I talk about the Law Society of Scotland’s possible options. We could devolve everything and then put agreements in place, if the JMC and intergovernmental relations worked properly. There are therefore several other options, and it is not just me saying that, but many of the organisations that have commented on the Bill.

*Ian Paisley:* Will the hon. Gentleman clarify his amendments? Is he suggesting that some parts of the UK should be treated differently from others? Should London have a different and better deal than, say, Cardiff, Edinburgh or Belfast? Should not we all, as UK subjects, be treated the same?

*Ian Murray:* I agree that all parts of the UK should be treated similarly, which is why I have always championed the UK’s staying in the single market and the customs union. That would allow us to leave the EU while keeping the regulatory harmonisation required—the very regulatory harmonisation that the hon. Gentleman railed against just a few moments ago—and keeping the UK single market operating within the EU single market.

*Dr Whitford:* On the question of where power actually lies, we know that many farmers voted leave, yet I know, having attended a National Farmers Union meeting on Friday, that the idea of farming and hill farming in Scotland being controlled from here is something they consider anathema. Given the failure to pass on the convergence uplift in 2013-14, they are frightened about farming powers being here.

*Ian Murray:* These are complex discussions and issues, but the key principle is that any power devolved under schedule 5 to the Scotland Act 1998 should be devolved. No one is saying that everything should be devolved at one minute past midnight—or whenever we leave the European Union—but these discussions must take place on the convergence uplift in 2013-14, they are frightened about farming powers being here.

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*Deidre Brock:* The hon. Gentleman mentioned the hoarding of powers at Westminster. One of the biggest problems that I see with clause 11 is that, ultimately, Scottish Ministers will not be able to amend retained EU law, potentially for an indefinite period, although UK Ministers will. That is completely against the word and spirit of the devolution settlement.

*Ian Murray:* It is against the spirit of the devolution settlement, but it is also against the spirit of the referendum that we heard about earlier. The Scottish people, the Welsh people and the Northern Irish people voted for devolution.

There is no doubt that clause 11 is using a sledgehammer to crack a nut. There are many other ways of legislating that would allow a transition on day one that would respect the devolution settlement. The Law Society has put forward such options. As the leader of the SNP said, the way in which the Government are using clause 11 is clear. There is no sunset provision and no timetable is attached. There is no list of powers, and there is no indication of when certain powers should be given priority. There is no commitment to intergovernmental working and there is no real commitment to devolution. We were diverted to today’s discussions in Brussels because that is part of the disrespect for the devolution settlement in this country, which is why the process has become so difficult.

*Jim Shannon:* Does the hon. Gentleman also acknowledge the disrespect that the Taoiseach has shown for the people of Northern Ireland? He has said that he now speaks for them, but the Democratic Unionist party and other elected parties do not. Is it not time that he knew that when it comes to Northern Ireland, democracy and the political process, the power lies here in the Chamber? It certainly does not lie with Leo Varadkar, the Taoiseach of the Republic of Ireland.

*Ian Murray:* We may be being diverted from the point again, but I think that the Committee, the country and anyone who happens to be watching our proceedings will see that the three members of the Democratic Unionist party who are sitting in the Chamber are the
real Government. They are dictating the terms of Brexit—and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is doubtless the de facto Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union—in terms of the power that they have over the Prime Minister.

As I said earlier, it is clear that between courses this afternoon the Prime Minister has gone from a negotiated agreement to a set of texts to throwing it all in the bin alongside any leftovers from lunch. It is clear that the DUP—10 Members of Parliament from Northern Ireland—are holding the Government to account and holding them by the neck, because it is much more important for the Prime Minister to hold on to power than it is to do what is the best interests of all our nations.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Ind): May I gently point out to the hon. Gentleman that at least there are three DUP Members in the Chamber, whereas by my count only two Scottish Labour MPs are present?

The hon. Gentleman talks a very good game for defending the Union, but the fact is that the leader of the SNP in Scotland, Mrs Sturgeon, and the Mayor of London have been very quick to start talking about how they would like divergence and special deals, which would completely wreck the union of the United Kingdom.

Ian Murray: I normally say that I am grateful for interventions, but in this instance I will refrain. I do not think that the question of how many members of how many parties are in the Chamber at any particular time is relevant. What is relevant is ensuring that Members are in the Lobby tonight. I hope that 13 of the hon. Gentleman’s Scottish Conservative colleagues will go into the Lobby with us to change the Bill, because that is what is important. This is about voting, not about talking and then doing nothing.

Paul Masterton: The hon. Gentleman is giving a very good speech, but he is not giving a speech in support of his own amendments; he is giving a speech in support of a middle ground between the positions of the UK Government and the Scottish Government. Does he not understand that his amendment would devolve everything from day one, with no constraints, thereby enabling all four constituent parts of the UK to do whatever they wanted? That is not the Labour position, and it is bonkers.

Ian Murray: It is funny that the hon. Gentleman now calls my position bonkers after seeking assurances that amendments 164 and 165 would be carried by the Government to ensure that clause 11 became a much better clause, and I look forward to his being influential with Ministers to ensure that those amendments are carried.

Stephen Doughty: Is it not the case that the reason why my hon. Friend and I—and, indeed, a number of Members on both sides of the House—had to work together to table the amendments, with the support of the Welsh and Scottish Governments, is that the Bill is deficient in so many areas, and needs to be fixed in so many areas before we can even consider allowing it to proceed, and before the Welsh and Scottish legislatures will give their consent?

Ian Murray: Absolutely. I think that it comes down to the word “trust”. Many reports on the Bill come down to whether or not the devolved Administrations trust the UK Government to deliver what they are attempting to deliver in the Bill, and I do not think we can trust them to do that. The Law Society of Scotland has argued that the Bill should be revised because clause 11 has no transitional basis: it is an open-ended provision that could last forever. We could see Ministers in Cardiff, Edinburgh, Belfast and, indeed, Whitehall arguing about the minutiae of the detail rather than getting on with the job in hand, for political purposes. We have seen in the House, in respect of every single aspect of devolution, that when it comes down to the politics, it is the people who lose out and the politics that try to win out. We should be very wary of that while we are debating this Bill.

Stephen Doughty: Thank you my hon. Friend for giving way again. He is being very generous. Does he agree that this is relevant to an example that has been set in relation to so many issues, including the issue of the Agricultural Wages Board? We do not want case after case to end up in the Supreme Court, with vast amounts of taxpayers’ money being spent and the UK Government fighting the devolved Governments over matters on which they have the clear competence.

Ian Murray: Absolutely. We could become involved in a constitutional battle with no end in sight. The Institute for Government, which I am sure is respected by Members on both sides of the House, has said that the Bill “has exacerbated the already serious tensions between the UK and the devolved Governments”, and we see that day after day. The Repeal Bill Alliance concluded:

“By returning all EU power to Westminster against the wishes of Scotland and Wales, the EU (Withdrawal) Bill is an attack on the principles of devolution.”
So time and again Committees of this House, independent bodies and respected bodies tell us that this Bill is deficient, is a power grab by the Government, and could be done in a different way.

The report of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee concludes that, on clause 11:

“The overall concerns regarding the devolution aspects of the EUW Bill arise from the constitutionally insensitive nature of the U.K. Government’s approach”.

I am trying through these amendments to take away some of that constitutional insensitivity, so as to be able to get to a place where we can be much more comfortable that the Government will do what they said they would do.

The Brexit Select Committee and its well respected Chair, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), have also produced a report on the Bill and found that “the devolved administrations have insufficient trust in the process for agreeing these future relationships and have, accordingly, indicated that they will withhold legislative consent from the Bill.”

That is an incredibly serious issue, because the Scotland Act 2016 put the Sewel convention on a legislative footing that means the UK Government should not be legislating in devolved areas unless the Scottish Parliament, or any of the other devolved Administrations, pass a legislative consent motion. They are saying they will withhold an LCM as this Bill is currently constituted, which would mean we end up in yet another constitutional difficulty with regard to whether this Bill will even be passed.

What will the UK Government do? They will ride roughshod over the constitutional settlement, over the Sewel convention, and over the Scotland Act 2016, in which the convention was put on a statutory footing, in order to get this Bill through. But if they were just to work cross-party on clause 11, and, indeed, with some of their own Members from the Scottish Conservatives, they might get to a place that we could all support and respect.

It is worth working through some of the alternative solutions put forward by the Law Society of Scotland, particularly for the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire, who is desperate to find an alternative to this clause. The society is not saying that any of these solutions take preference over the others; it is merely proposing some of the different ways this could be done to make it less constitutionally insensitive. One of them is:

“Replace the cross-cutting EU law constraint with new cross-cutting constraints, for example to protect the UK single market and/or to comply with international obligations. These might be more or less extensive than the EU law constraint in practice, but would have the benefit of (a) an underpinning principle and (b) catering for unforeseen cases.”

I am not advocating any of the suggestions, but it is worth airing that there are alternatives to clause 11 in this Bill.

Another of the society’s suggestions is:

“Replace the EU law constraint leaving EU competences to fall as determined by schedule 5” of the Scotland Act 1998,

“and any new common frameworks to be established by agreement between the UK Government and the devolved administrations.”

That provides a direct answer to the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire. We could devolve everything, but come to an agreement with regard to some of the UK-type frameworks and common frameworks that might be required.

Alternatively, we could:

“Adopt the provisions in the bill on a transitional basis only and subject to a specific cut-off date. At the expiry of the transitional period, powers in devolved areas would revert to the devolved legislatures, unless specific alternatives had been put in place.”

Indeed, we could clearly mix and match from the four alternative solutions from the Law Society of Scotland, but this goes back to the fundamental principle of trust—to the fundamental principle of whether the UK Government and devolved Administrations are truly working together to seek a solution or whether the politics of this trumps the solutions that might be required. That is why we should pass the Opposition Front-Bench new clause on the JMC.

I have proposed these amendments to try and take the edge off this Bill. We are heading into a constitutional crisis. The Conservative party has left this country out of the EU and is risking the constitutional framework of the UK. The question that cannot be answered by this Government is the same question that the Members of the SNP cannot answer, but in reverse: why are the EU single market and customs unions so important—as I believe they are, and on which we see the issues with regard to the island of Ireland—but the UK single market is not? Likewise, I say to the Conservative party, how can they have stood on a platform in the 2014 Scottish referendum saying that removing Scotland from the UK single market would mean a hard border, customs checks and no free movement of people from Scotland into England, and defending that principle, but do completely the opposite in terms of the island of Ireland now? We cannot have the single market and customs union principles on one hand, and then discard them on the other because it suits our political ideology.

It is clear that having a frictionless, seamless border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland while not staying in the single market or the customs union is utterly impossible to achieve. I say that because I was persuaded by the arguments the UK Government made back in 2014 that removing Scotland from the single market of the United Kingdom would require a hard border at Berwick.

6.15 pm

Joanna Cherry: The hon. Gentleman keeps referring to the single market of the United Kingdom. Does he agree that what we have in the UK is a unitary market, because we do not have four separate states, but instead have a union of four separate nations? What the EU has is a single market, which is a regulatory alignment of sovereign states. We do not have that in the UK; we have a unitary market. Will the hon. Gentleman use his language more carefully, please?
Ian Murray: That is legal semantics. I can buy an animal in Edinburgh and sell it in London, crossing the border with it in the back of my car—not that I would do so, as that would probably be illegal, but this is just to highlight the point—and do that in one single market, and not have any customs checks or transfer paperwork, apart from the legal paperwork required, and I could also do that across the EU. Outside the legal semantics, the point I am making is that the SNP says the EU single market is a good thing, and I agree, but says the UK single market is a bad thing, and I disagree. We also have the Conservative party saying that the UK single market is the most wonderful single market in the world, and I agree, but it is also saying that the EU single market is a bad thing and we must come out of it, but we can keep all the benefits of that at the same time.

Joanna Cherry: The crucial difference between the single market and the unitary market is that in the single market there are 28 sovereign states who meet together to make their rules from the top down, whereas in the UK’s unitary market the rules are imposed from the United Kingdom. This supports the hon. Gentleman’s argument, because his argument, which I agree with, is that these frameworks across the UK should not be imposed from the top down, but should grow up organically from the bottom.

Ian Murray: We have just had a bombshell there; the hon. and learned Lady has just told us that she wants to stay part of the UK. That is what we can surmise from that intervention, and I completely agree with her that the best way for Scotland, and Wales, to thrive is to stay part of the UK. Indeed, in my view, the best way for the UK to thrive is to stay part of the single market and customs union of the EU, and all of these issues would therefore fall away, because we would not need clause 11, because we would not need the framework in place to be able to put UK frameworks together, because we could stay within the frameworks that are already in place. It is strange that we will spend a significant amount of time in this Chamber, in the Committee Rooms of this House, and in all the devolved Administrations discussing frameworks that we already currently have.

The Government strategy is that they want every benefit they currently have from the EU while not being a member of the EU. I suggest that if the Government want to achieve that, they should stay in rather than wrench themselves out. That would resolve all the problems, and would have saved the Prime Minister lunch this afternoon, because they would have had a very straightforward solution to their problem.

I will not press my amendment to a vote if those on my Front Bench are going to press amendment 42, because they are very similar in nature. My Front-Bench colleagues’ amendment is much more technically efficient than my proposal, and we know that technically ineffective amendments tend to be criticised. I will therefore support my Front-Bench colleagues’ proposal, and finish by saying that the simple solution for Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales would be to stay in the single market and the customs union.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Sir David, thank you for calling me at this stage of the debate. To be fair to the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), I think she was chafing against the Act of Union, which, as she correctly described, established a unitary market. The Act of Union banned tariffs between Scotland and England and established the free movement of goods.

I commend the use of the word “trust” by the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray), which he used regularly, but I question whether he is in fact doing much to promote trust, as this debate needs to do. He talked about heading into a constitutional crisis, but I think he did so to create a sense of distrust.

I was also disappointed when the hon. Gentleman questioned the motives of my hon. Friends who represent Scottish constituencies. One could suggest that people in glass houses should not throw stones. I do not know which part of the Labour party he represents, but they come in diverse characters these days. Is he in that part of the party that supports its leadership, or the part that is trying to get rid of it? Is he part of Momentum or against it? I do not know whether he is living in fear of deselection. The one thing we do know about him, however, is that he is subject to the Labour Whip. It is not unusual for members of a governing party to be subject to a single Whip, but I think he undervalued the highly significant speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton).

My hon. Friend made it clear that his support for the Government on this issue “should not and must not be taken as an acceptance of clause 11 as it stands.” That demonstrates the fact that, while my hon. Friends representing Scottish constituencies take the Conservative Whip, they demonstrate an independence of mind and work with their colleagues in the Scottish Parliament, whom I met recently on a visit to the Scottish Parliament, along with Scottish Conservative and Scottish National party Members, to discuss clause 11. My hon. Friend also made it clear that the legislative consent motions might not be granted for clause 11 as it stands.

We all accept that the Gina Miller case made it clear that the requirement for legislative consent motions in the devolved Parliaments would not effectively block the passage of the legislation in this House, but it has created some constitutional tension. My hon. Friend pointed out that the progress of the Bill is likely to be somewhat impedied by the absence of legislative consent motions from Holyrood and Cardiff, and from Northern Ireland if the Assembly is operating there. This is an important message. It demonstrates that the devolution that Labour said it was promoting when it gave us devolution has turned into a very different constitutional reality—

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): There was a referendums. It was the will of the people.

Mr Jenkin: I am sorry, I did not realise that I was saying anything particularly provocative—[Interruption.] Yes, there was a referendum, but the constitutional reality has turned into something much more federal in character than the proponents of the original legislation told us it would be.

I do not want to detain the Committee for long. I have chosen to speak in the debate because I am the Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, which is looking at the relationships
between the four Governments and Parliaments of the United Kingdom. We issued a report on inter-institutional relations earlier this year, in the previous Parliament, and we issued an interim report just last week on clause 11. That followed meetings that we held in Edinburgh, which will be followed by further meetings in Cardiff and Edinburgh, and if we can get to Northern Ireland, we will. What was striking about the meetings in Cardiff and Holyrood was how little this kind of interchange takes place, how slenderly we know other individuals in other Parliaments throughout the United Kingdom, and how there are no formal mechanisms for proper exchange between the four Parliaments of the United Kingdom. What a shortage that is!

This debate is less about leaving the European Union and more about devolution. It is about reconciling competing narratives of what devolution in the United Kingdom has come to mean, and about dealing with the lack of trust we have inherited from the present devolution settlement. The debate about clause 11 reflects that.

Usually, when devolved powers are going to be legislated for in this House, there is a great deal of discussion, large numbers of papers are produced in all parts of the United Kingdom and eventually, a piece of legislation emerges with a degree of consensus around it. This Bill emerged in much shorter order. We are told that there was very little discussion about the contents of clause 11. This underlines how, under strain, the reflex of our constitutional habits is not to consult. We in the United Kingdom Parliament, and those of us who support United Kingdom Governments, in the plural, have to recognise that there is a serious gap in our capability to discuss, explore, befriend and understand each other throughout the United Kingdom.

**Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab):** I am interested in the point the hon. Gentleman is making, but is it not the case that the UK Government consulted very little with Members of all parties across the House during the preparation of this Bill after the referendum? Does he agree that that was a massive mistake?

**Mr Jenkin:** The hon. Gentleman has been in this House for quite some time, and he should be used to that by now. That is the way in which Governments have tended to behave. Yes, we have tried to improve things. We now have pre-legislative scrutiny, for example. I did not vote for the Lisbon treaty, which put article 50 into the treaties. I did not vote to have a two-year time limit on the negotiations on leaving the European Union. I suspect that the hon. Gentleman did vote for the Lisbon treaty, which put article 50 into the treaties. I did not vote to have a two-year time limit on the negotiations on leaving the European Union.

**Ian C. Lucas:** What is unusual about this Bill is that it followed a referendum that means we are going to leave the European Union, and there are splits in both the major parties on this issue. The right approach would have been for the Government to consult much more widely on how this legislation should be taken forward. The reason that it is in such a mess at the moment is that the Government are allowing a small coterie to dominate the conduct of the process, rather than consulting the House as a whole.

**Mr Jenkin:** I do not accept that the Bill is in any kind of a mess. I think that we ought to keep the effects of clause 11 in proportion. From the perspective of the Government—and, in reality, from the perspective of what actually happens in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland—the clause is a status quo measure. The powers, while not reserved by the Scotland Acts, were reserved by virtue of our membership of the European Union, so there is no power grab. If the hon. Gentleman wants me to, I can quote from the evidence that the Committee received from Mr Nigel Smith. He was the chairman of Scotland Forward, which ran the pro-devolution campaign in 1997. He stated:

“Nobody who voted for the Scottish Parliament exactly twenty years ago need worry—there is no ‘power grab’ underway.”

We did receive countervailing evidence. Incidentally, the report we published last week is an interim report. We produced no conclusions or recommendations, but we wanted to surface and discuss many of the pieces of evidence that we have received and make them available for this debate.

6.30 pm

Perhaps more relevant to keeping clause 11 in proportion, Professor Alan Page was commissioned by the Scottish Parliament to analyse the effect of leaving the European Union on the devolution settlement. Paragraph 5 of his paper states:

“The main conclusion that emerges from this analysis is that most existing EU competences are reserved to the UK Parliament.”

He also says in paragraph 6:

“The policy responsibilities that would fall to the Scottish Parliament are correspondingly few”. We need to keep that in proportion.

**Pete Wishart:** The main conclusion of Alan Page’s work, with which I am sure the hon. Gentleman is more than familiar, is that clause 11 proposes a hierarchical version of devolution whereby this place has all the central powers. I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman does not know that, because that was the main conclusion. Clause 11 creates a hierarchy of devolution under which, for the first time, this place has control in asserting its sovereignty, and Scotland would fall far under the radar.

I am surprised that he is not familiar with that work.

**Mr Jenkin:** The hon. Gentleman will be surprised no longer, because my next point is that the manner of clause 11 reflects a lack of sensitivity on these matters. Clause 11 suggests that there will be no time limits on the retention of powers and no process for the discussion of how powers should be handed over. There is only consultation through the JMC, which meets sporadically, and there is no statement of long-term aims for where the powers should eventually lie.

Returning to the hon. Member for Edinburgh South and his comments about trust, we should be asking how we can build some trust. The great gap in the devolution settlement, as it exists, is that it is based on a binary notion of what devolution means: power is either reserved or devolved. In fact, most decentralised systems of government have shared competences. The EU itself operates substantially on the basis of shared competences and, paradoxically, it is leaving the EU that is exposing the flaws in the devolution settlement. There are so few mechanisms for dealing with shared competences—virtually none.
Mr Jenkin: I do agree, but the number of times that the JMC and its sub-committees have met formally is few. Months can go by with no meetings, and then a Whitehall Minister will say, “Ooh, we should have one.” That does not inspire confidence. Perhaps the JMC should have fixed diarised formal meetings every year, because there would be things to discuss whether or not a Minister of the Crown here actually thinks there might, and that would give people an opportunity to get to know each other better.

Martin Whitfield: Does the hon. Gentleman also agree that diarised meetings and more interaction might lead to confidence and agreement between the Governments?

Mr Jenkin: I could not agree more, but I hope that the hon. Gentleman will acknowledge—I am not being accusatory—that this has been a failure of previous Governments as well as this one. When the Select Committee visited the Welsh Assembly and the Welsh Government during the 2010 Parliament, First Minister Carwyn Jones actually complained to us, perhaps with more rhetoric than was justified, that he had been trying to get a meeting with Prime Minister David Cameron for months and months—more than a year—but had not been allowed to have one. We need fewer excuses for people who want to be destructive and more confidence that meetings will take place and that they are valued by all parties.

Stephen Kerr: Is it my hon. Friend’s view that the mechanisms that determine such communication should be established by statute?

Mr Jenkin: I have an open mind on that, and I have fiddled around with my amendments, which have not appeared on the order paper today, to see whether we can find a way of doing that. I do not know whether this is the right Bill through which to do that—probably not—but such things are statutory in other decentralised systems. There clearly needs to be something much more formal, but we should perhaps experiment without statute first to see whether it is necessary. My Committee took evidence from one civil servant and a former Speaker’s Counsel who said, “It has worked very well for the past 300 years, so why do we need statute?” but that does not recognise that we now have competing political centres with, I repeat, competing narratives about what the constitution actually is. SNP colleagues talk about the natural sovereignty of the Scottish people, but the legal constitutional reality is that the Queen in Parliament in Westminster is still absolutely sovereign. Those things need to be aired, discussed and understood.

Deidre Brock: Further to that point, the Scottish Government have consistently made it clear that they cannot support the Bill as it stands, so if the UK Government do not vote for amendment 72 tonight, would that not render the Sewel convention completely pointless and not worth the vellum it is written on?

Mr Jenkin: I hear the hon. Lady’s impatience, but we need to be more patient. We are not completing the consideration of this Bill this evening, and I am encouraged by the work done by the First Secretary of State, who chaired the last meeting of the Joint Ministerial Committee and seemed to be drawing people together around some agreed principles for how joint frameworks might be approached. We all want to see that, so let us hope that that work will continue.

Kevin Brennan: The hon. Gentleman was mildly critical of the Welsh First Minister for using rhetoric, but the rhetoric in that relationship came from Prime Minister David Cameron, who said that he wanted to follow a respect agenda but then failed even to have a meeting with the First Minister. May I also correct the hon. Gentleman on something? Ministers actually know each other very well at the moment and met extremely frequently prior to the introduction of this Bill. The problem is that UK Ministers ignored the advice that they were getting from both Scottish and Welsh Ministers, which was that something like clause 11 would be utterly unacceptable.

Mr Jenkin: The better we know each other, the more we will forgive each other for the rhetoric. That is what I found when my Committee went to Edinburgh on a semi-formal visit. The hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) and I, as Chairman, had some open and frank discussions about some difficult issues with people I had never even met before, but we of course found that there was lots of common ground.

My next point is that there are no inter-parliamentary arrangements. We had to scabble around for a bit of budget to do the trip. We found it in the end, but there needs to be a habit of people in this Parliament interacting much more openly and frequently with our counterparts in the other Parliaments. For example, the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee and the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee have competences that are shared by Committees in different Parliaments. Those Committees should be meeting regularly together. Another suggestion worthy of consideration is that there should be some formal inter-parliamentary council in the United Kingdom to allow representatives of all four Parliaments to meet on a regular basis on some kind of neutral ground.

Vernon Coaker: The Good Friday/Belfast agreement set up many inter-parliamentary institutions, both east-west and north-south. The hon. Gentleman talked about trust. How does he think that trust has been helped by what we saw this morning, with the Government saying there would be a deal on the border in Ireland and the Prime Minister then having to come out of lunch because the DUP either had not been consulted or had not agreed to the arrangements? What does it do for both Unionism and nationalism in Ireland when such things happen? Frankly, it looks as though the Government are in chaos, do not know what they are doing and, in pursuing it, are undermining the whole peace process in Northern Ireland.

Mr Jenkin: Sir David, am I to be tempted to enter a debate on today’s negotiations, or should we wait until tomorrow, when perhaps someone will come to tell the House something about what has been going on?

A formal inter-parliamentary council that meets on a regular basis would be another opportunity for parliamentarians to understand each other better.
Kevin Brennan: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Jenkin: I must press on, but I will give way once more.

Kevin Brennan: Does the hon. Gentleman acknowledge that there is an inter-parliamentary council? The British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, which obviously includes the Government of the Republic of Ireland, provides an opportunity for parliamentarians to get to know each other. Perhaps it would be useful if, as the Chair of the Select Committee on Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs, he were to be a member of that Assembly. On today’s issues, does it not show that we have a Prime Minister who is in office but not in power and a DUP that is in power but not in office?

Mr Jenkin: I am endeavouring to raise the tone of this debate, and obviously I am not succeeding with certain Opposition Members.

My final suggestion goes to the heart of what clause 11 is about. I mentioned that, in previous discussions about devolution, there has always been a Silk commission or a Calman commission. There has always been a body that has deliberated, drawn out the more controversial politics and tried to make the discussion more objective. I wonder whether there is a case for the Government convening some kind of standing commission, under the scrutiny of a joint group of parliamentarians, to dispassionately look through the powers returning from the EU that intersect with the devolved Parliaments and Assemblies in order to determine what powers should lie where, both immediately as we leave the European Union and in the longer term.

At the moment, I am afraid my criticism of clause 11, as it stands, is that it does not give any assurance about process or much assurance about consultation, time limits or sun-setting. It just sets out this static proposal.

Gerard Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Jenkin: I will not give way again. I have said everything I want to say.

My Committee is continuing its inquiry. If any right hon. or hon. Member wants to have their say, they can always submit evidence to our Committee.

Chris Bryant: On a point of order, Sir David. I am not sure whether you were in the Chamber earlier, but Mr Speaker made it clear when asked that the Prime Minister intended to make a statement to the House tomorrow about the negotiations and discussions she has been having with the DUP and Europe.

I gather that Downing Street is notifying the press, not this House, that there will be no such statement tomorrow and that the Prime Minister does not intend to make a statement. Is there any way you can make sure that Mr Speaker is aware of this and, for that matter, that Downing Street is fully aware that if we are taking back control—I thought that was the whole point—this House should be kept fully and appropriately informed of the negotiations at every stage?

The Temporary Chair (Sir David Crausby): I will certainly pass on your remarks to Mr Speaker but, in the meantime, you have made your point to the House.

Pete Wishart: It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin), who I commend for his thoughtful speech and for how his Committee has sensitively considered some of these issues. We have seen the interim report, and I look forward to the full conclusions. My hon. Friend the Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) is a member of the Committee, so the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex has more than able deputies to back him up.

I rise to support the amendments variously tabled on behalf of the Scottish and Welsh Governments in the name of my hon. Friends and other hon. Members. The key point is that where we are going requires cross-party attention, support and consensus, but it also requires cross-institution support. The efforts to try to resolve some of the difficulties in clause 11 not just in this Chamber but, to give them credit, in Committees, in the other place and in the Scottish Parliament have to be noted. We are starting to see progress on concluding some of these conversations and discussions. This debate will help us to move things on.

6.45 pm

I will address the main point but, by way of context, we have to acknowledge that clause 11 is flawed. It does not work, it is unsustainable and it is not in line with what we understand about the devolution settlement. The clause has to be amended. There are very few people in this House who would get to their feet and try to defend it, because it is unworkable and does not respect what we understand as the principles of devolution.

In fact, clause 11 turns the central principles and tenets of devolution on their head; it drives a coach and horses through everything we understand about the devolution settlement.

The central tenet of devolution is straightforward and simple. The basic concept is that if something is not listed as reserved, it is presumed to be devolved. That was the founding principle of devolution way before the Scotland Act 1998. It goes back to the days of the Scottish constitutional convention. In fact, it goes even further back to the days before Donald Dewar was even knee high to a parliamentary grasshopper—that is how far back our institutional memory goes when it comes to devolution.

Gerard Killen: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the danger of clause 11 is that it seeks to replace Scotland’s relationship with the EU with Scotland’s relationship with the UK? It is important for the Government to set the tone on how they intend to proceed on an equal basis with the devolved Governments.

Pete Wishart: The hon. Gentleman is, of course, absolutely right. I will address some of those issues. He is spot on that there is an imbalance in how everything is repatriated. The repatriation of the powers is the central feature that concerns us.

Devolution is an elegant solution. Devolution in this country is asymmetric, with the different Parliaments and Assemblies having different powers. The United Kingdom is a complex constitutional nation, and we have designed devolution to meet the demands of a complex, multi-nation United Kingdom. We therefore muck around with the basic premises and principles of devolution at our peril, which is why clause 11 presents such a clear danger and threat that it must be amended.
It is also important to say that Scotland did not vote to leave the European Union. Every single local authority area in Scotland voted to remain in the European Union. I now have constituents who are very concerned about the chaotic cluelessness at the heart of the negotiations and discussions about taking this country out of the European Union. The Scottish Parliament has become collateral in all those conversations and discussions. There is real concern about how our Parliament will operate and about the powers it has the right to expect to progress with.

**Paul Flynn** (Newport West) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the secret to the Government’s thinking on this Bill is in the fact that they are insisting on including a date for withdrawal from Europe but that they refuse to include a sunset clause to give us a date when the powers they are about to grab from Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland will be repatriated?

**Pete Wishart**: That is an important point, because a sunset clause is the sort of thing we need to see. It would give confidence to the hon. Gentleman and me, rather than just naming the day that we leave the European Union—we are all familiar with that date, anyway.

It is important that we set the context for this debate. We have to see Northern Ireland in the context of devolved powers. Today, we believed we had some sort of solution to the Northern Irish question. There was an agreement. The Prime Minister of Ireland was prepared to get to his feet and say that a solution had been delivered and garnered, only for it to be knocked out of the water by a telephone conversation with Arlene Foster. That is where some of these issues about devolution have gone.

We have now heard the elegant phrase “regulatory divergence”. I had never heard of it before today, but it is fantastic and I want to hear more of it. If regulatory divergence works for Northern Ireland, I am thinking it could just about work for Scotland, given the range of powers we have in the Scottish Parliament and the legislative competence we have in a swathe of areas. So let us hear more about this regulatory divergence. I am disappointed that none of my DUP friends are in, as they could have talked a bit more to me about some of their concerns. The last thing we need in the Scottish Parliament is to be sucked into all this process, so it is incumbent on this Government to ensure that devolution continues to operate on the basic premise set out in the 1998 Act. The sooner we get reassurance that that is their view and they introduce considered amendments, we will be happier—it starts with clause 11.

I listened carefully to the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex, and I looked at his Committee’s report, saw the witnesses he brought forward and was surprised that he referenced Nigel Smith. My Committee also looked at this issue, hearing from a variety of witnesses—the House of Lords Constitution Committee and the Scottish Parliament Committees have also looked at it—and it is hard to find anybody with expertise in constitutional politics, either on the legal frameworks or in terms of having an academic interest, who does not agree that clause 11 does not work and is in need of amendment. Of all the guests that have been before the various Committees dealing with these matters it is difficult to find someone who would support the Government’s position, and I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on doing so.

There needs to be a basic understanding that the Scottish Government have stated that if clause 11 proceeds as currently constituted, they will not be in a position to recommend a legislative consent motion. That will lead, at the very least, to a constitutional stand-off, which would be singularly unnecessary and unhelpful, and would of course get in the way of all the other issues the UK Government have to deal with in this Brexit mess. Surely the last thing they want is to get into a constitutional stand-off with the Scottish Government. I know that progress has been made and that there is not much difference on some of these things, so it would be much better if the UK Government just fixed this for goodness’ sake. They should just get it sorted if we are so close; they should accept these amendments as a way forward and we could all then get relaxed and happy about the fact that there will not be any sort of constitutional issue to do with it. The Minister needs to say that we are going to be doing that.

It is good to have a look at what has been included in this Bill, particularly in clause 11, so let us start with something that the clause does not do. We have to be clear that it does not return powers from the EU to the devolved Administrations. Instead, it returns powers within the devolved competences solely and exclusively to the UK Government and Parliament. Worse than that, it imposes new restrictions on how the Scottish Parliament can operate when it comes to these devolved competences. The Scottish Parliament and Government will take a double hit. The clause would give the UK Government power to legislate in relation to policy areas that are the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government.

There is another issue, which has not been touched on today. At the point where we leave the EU, all these powers are repatriated to the UK Government and into some form of redistributive system—we are not really clear how that would work, as that has not been stated. When we leave, the EU will of course continue to amend and legislate in these areas, and the UK Government will be legislating on behalf of the Scottish Government. So there will be a space in between, from when we leave, where there is a divergence between EU law and UK retained law, which this Government solely and exclusively will do. Not only will the UK Government have powers on retained law when we leave the EU, but they will have ongoing responsibilities, as we continue to make that journey from leaving the EU, to try to fill that gap in between.

**Stephen Kerr**: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on making a very positive contribution to this debate compared with the speech we heard earlier from the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford). The worthy report that his Committee produced, which is a huge contribution to the establishment of common ground, states:

“We recommend that the UK Government agrees with the devolved administrations what areas should be subject to common frameworks and which ones can be devolved.”

Is that not exactly what is going on? Is that not the common ground that he and we are seeking so that we can get this process to move?

**Pete Wishart**: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. My Committee looked at these issues and considered them seriously, and we hope our
report makes a contribution to addressing some of these issues. The key point that he makes, and the thing we have to start to get to in agreeing issues relating to common frameworks, is that they have to be agreed by the Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament before they can be progressed. This idea that frameworks can be imposed upon devolved Assemblies and Parliaments is unsustainable and cannot be operated. That is—

Several hon. Members rose—

Pete Wishart: I will make some progress; I will deal with our report before letting Members in. The key point is that this needs to be agreed and consented to before progressing. We have to get that in place in order to start moving forward on this sort of thing.

Stephen Kerr rose—

Pete Wishart: I have given way to the hon. Gentleman. A lot of people wish to speak and I know he will get a chance, so he will be able to come back to this and we can have a conversation about it.

Clause 11 also changes the fundamental dynamic between the Scottish Parliament and this House. Under the clause, the UK assumes a role as the master and repository of all retained EU legislation in devolved areas. As I said to the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex, who is deep in conversation with the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin), the provision creates for the first time a hierarchical model of devolution, as Alan Page said in the work that he did on behalf of the Scottish Government. This House will face absolutely no restriction in how it may want to operate in its areas of devolved competence, but the Scottish Parliament will face restrictions. This represents a sort of “know your place, Scotland”, whereby this House asserts its sovereignty on the Scottish Parliament. That is not good enough. We have a conversation among several Members about sovereignty and our different understanding of and approaches to it culturally. This House obviously takes the view that parliamentary sovereignty is what it is all about, whereas we take the view that it is about the sovereignty of the people and the claim or right of the Scottish people to assert their sovereignty. This idea of a “know your place, Scotland”—

Stephen Kerr rose—

Pete Wishart: I have given way to the hon. Gentleman. I want to make some progress. In large swathes of devolved competencies, we will be subject to UK frameworks, determined and controlled by the UK Government. That will never be satisfactory to anybody who works in any of the devolved structures and any devolved parliamentarian.

Let me try to make it simple for the Brexiteers—although when I look around I do not see very many of them. It is strange to look around and see mainly remain types; I when I look around I do not see very many of them. It is strange to look around and see mainly remain types; I do not know who to pick on. I am trying desperately to make it simple for him so that he can get an understanding of this issue. This situation is like Scotland giving up its place in the European Union as part of the United Kingdom in order to join a UK super-state, but the super-state does not seem to be as benign as the European Parliament. For Scotland, this UK super-state we are expected to be part of would make its jaundiced view of the EU look like a benign, cuddly, receptive institution of enlightenment. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) for this analogy. He is not in place, but I hope he will join us later with his words—

Stephen Kerr rose—

Pete Wishart: I have given way to the hon. Gentleman already. This UK super-state seeks to control and restrict the operation of Scotland, and it is prepared to strip us of powers faster than any United Kingdom Independence party cartoon version of some evil EU bureaucrat or Commissioner would. I wish to make a comparison with Ireland, because it is instructive. Ireland, as a member of the EU, can almost stop the progress of Brexit—it has the powers to do that, and in the past couple of weeks it has asserted that that might be something it may be obliged to seek. Scotland, as part of the UK super-state, does not even have the power to legislate for the best interests of hill farmers in Perthshire—that is going to be left to this House.

That shows how power grabbing the UK super-state and this place are going to be. This is a real power grab, more menacing than any fantasy dreamt up by our Brexiteer friends in relation to their death star version of Brussels. They are even starting to use the words of the super-state. Our integrated UK joint economy is now to be “the single market”. Any minute now the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex will be made a UK commissioner and we will start to see “UK-pol” and “UK-atom”. This is the sort of place they are going with this creation of the British super-state. We have to be very careful when we are designing these things. We do not want to swap our useful place in Europe in order to be junior and subservient members of their British super-state.

Stephen Kerr rose—

Pete Wishart: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman just to shut him up for a bit.

Stephen Kerr: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way to shut me up. All the things he has said for the past few minutes, which have detracted from the tone of his speech, are covered in “Common Frameworks: Definition and Principles” published by the Joint Ministerial Committee (EU Negotiations) on 16 October 2017. It describes in detail exactly how we will go about creating the common frameworks. It is the complete opposite of what the hon. Gentleman is saying. He is making it up as he goes along—it is very entertaining, by the way.

7 pm

Pete Wishart: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s intervention, as always, but I do not recognise his view of the way things are progressing. If he will forgive me, I will make some progress and we will look at some of these matters once again. I am not going to satisfy him on these matters and his intervention has certainly not reassured me about the general progress that we have to make.
Let us get back to more of a consensual tone, because I note from the hon. Gentleman’s irritation that I may have been a tad too political in some of my remarks. I look around and I see my colleagues from the Scottish Affairs Committee on the Conservative Benches. I am genuinely grateful for the contribution that they have made. We have designed a way forward in our recommendations and observations that might help to resolve this issue. Resolution is what is required, and I think we all agree that we can find it. Although our recommendations do not directly match what is in the amendments, they are roughly in the same territory.

I think that we all agree that a framework should be agreed and not imposed. Looking around, I think that we are all agreed on that one. That is good. I think that we agree that the UK Government should not legislate on areas of competence devolved to the Scottish Government. Perhaps there is not so much agreement on that one. It genuinely disappoints me that Conservative Members still believe that it is right for the UK Government to legislate in areas of devolved competence. I am looking at the ministerial team, hoping that they will reassure me that that is not what they are seeking to do. No, I am not getting that either. We will leave that there. We were doing well and making a bit of progress, but perhaps that is a step too far. That is the difficulty that we are starting to encounter.

I am pretty sure that Ministers do not share my characterisation of the process, so I will be interested to hear what they say. I am interested in how they will describe the repatriation of devolved competences straight to the United Kingdom, instead of to the devolved Assemblies and Parliaments where they should be; how we will come together to agree the common frameworks, working together in a spirit of consensus—all the warm, cuddly things that the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex suggested he wants—instead of having them imposed; and then some sort of process of redistribution through Orders in Council and all that sort of stuff. It is disappointing that we cannot hear that.

Amendments 164 and 42 would ensure that the UK Government had to consult and secure the agreement of the devolved Administrations in this context, so they roughly match what I have said. Indeed, they roughly match what the Secretary of State for Scotland has said. This is a really good quote from when he came before the Scottish Affairs Committee:

“A UK framework is not a framework that the UK Government imposes; it is a framework that is agreed across the United Kingdom.”

That is the approach that we need to hear more of, and we need to see how that works out. I very much support the cross-party amendments that were tabled on behalf of the Scottish and Welsh Governments, which are mainly in the name of the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray). I appreciated his comments today.

I am sorry to say to Labour Front Benchers that we cannot support new clause 64. I know that it is the lead new clause, but we will abstain because it suggests that the frameworks should be designed by the UK Government; not that they should come together with all the devolved Assemblies and Parliaments. Unfortunately, we cannot side with the Labour on that. I hope that it withdraws that new clause. I am looking at the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook). Please withdraw it because it is not helpful. We need all the parties in this House to work together. The presumption that the UK Government will be responsible for initiating the frameworks is not acceptable to us.

I do not even think that that is acceptable to—I am looking at Welsh colleagues—the Welsh Assembly, which the Labour party runs. I am looking at the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty). He will have to tell me whether the Welsh Government are absolutely happy about the UK Government designing frameworks.

Stephen Doughty indicated assent.

Pete Wishart: He is saying that it is, so I will accept that.

Paul Masterton: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the amendments he is discussing do not reflect the recommendations of the Scottish Affairs Committee and go further than those recommendations? Does he therefore understand why we as Scottish Conservatives are not in a position to support those amendments? It is not about talking Scotland down or being whipping boys for the Conservative Government, but a recognition that that is not the agreeable position where the Scottish Affairs Committee landed?

Pete Wishart: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, because I said that. I said that the amendments do not directly match our recommendations, but that they are in roughly the same territory. I think that he will agree with me about that. He is right that they do not match.

Stephen Doughty: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Pete Wishart: Yes, of course—as long as I am hearing from the Welsh Government.

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Gentleman gives me more power than I currently have. I refer him to the detail of new clause 64. Subsection (3) states:

“Ministers of the Crown shall only create”

these frameworks with the advice and consent of the devolved Administrations. We put that forward with the aim of securing their agreement. It relates to the wider discussion and to the other amendments about the Joint Ministerial Committee. I do not think that we should be doing things on a UK-wide basis without their consent. Unfortunately, that is exactly what the Government are doing.

Pete Wishart: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for clarifying that. I just refer him to exactly what is in new clause 64:

“Ministers of the Crown shall only create UK-wide frameworks”.

The presumption is that Ministers of the Crown will create them.

Kevin Brennan: Read the rest of it.

Pete Wishart: It speaks about consent, but that leaves it to Ministers of the Crown to create the UK-wide frameworks. That is not acceptable.

Kevin Brennan: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that Scottish Ministers and Welsh Ministers are also Ministers of the Crown?
Pete Wishart: Absolutely, but that is not the intention of the new clause.

It is shame we are in this position, because the Scottish Government and Welsh Assembly amendments, which all appear in the name of the hon. Member for Edinburgh South, were very clear in their focus and direction. Why Labour Front Benchers felt they had to come along and table new clause 64, I will never understand, but I leave it up to them. I have explained to them why we cannot support it this evening and I think they understand that reason. Let us leave it at that.

Lastly, I turn to my Scottish Conservative colleagues, ever so gently. [Interruption.] No, I think they have entered into this debate with a degree of consensus. The speech by the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) was very thoughtful and well delivered. However, this is a big test for them tonight. The devolution settlement is at stake. These are critical decisions that we must take. They can believe Ministers, but I do not know what reassurances they have received that this will be resolved. I have worked with Scottish Government colleagues and they have told me that progress has been made, but nothing is decided. The best way to get progress and to ensure that there is total focus from Ministers is to vote for the amendments. That will tell them clearly that all of us across this House say that something has to be done.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Pete Wishart: I was starting winding up, but I give way one last time.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I want to be absolutely clear about the new clause, because it says clearly:

"Ministers of the Crown shall only create UK-wide frameworks if they have consulted with, and secured the agreement of, the affected devolved administrations."

It is very, very clear. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that we should be working across parties as much as possible, but there is really no need to split hairs. That is very, very clear.

Pete Wishart: I do not know what part of that line the hon. Gentleman does not understand:

"Ministers of the Crown shall only create UK-wide frameworks".

It does not talk about anybody else. I will leave that there. It is unfortunate. I do not know why Labour Front Benchers could not have come to us and had a conversation about it. We could have put forward our concerns. We could have come together consensually, as we have been doing quite a lot, and worked something out, but unfortunately that was not the approach they wanted to adopt. That was up to them.

Back to my friends in the Scottish Conservative party—I feel like I have neglected them now. This evening is a test for them. The future and the principles of the devolution settlement are up for grabs this evening. They can trust these guys here—the Ministers—trustworthy though they may be, to do the right thing. Perhaps they have received assurances that the Government are going to do all these things and that everything is going to be all right.

But what is not acceptable—I know most of my Scottish Conservative colleagues and friends are new to this place—is for this to go to the unelected House of Lords to be amended. That is what increasingly this Government are doing. They do not like to accept amendments in this place, which is a democratic outrage. This House, which we are all elected to by our constituents, should be the exclusive place in which these things are resolved and fixed down. If those Tories think that we should resolve these really important issues in a place that is full of unelected donors and cronies and failed Members of Parliament—I am thinking about the guy who opposed me in the Scottish Parliament and who managed to get himself in there and a role in the legislature—then that is their view, not mine. When we have debates about such critical issues, we owe it to our constituents to ensure that it is we who decide and determine them and not those in another place, which is unelected.

I hope that the Scottish Tories are right—I am looking round now and can see that they have full confidence that this will be resolved and fixed down—but the one way that they can definitely guarantee that they will get their way is to vote. That is what we do in this House: we vote on issues that we agree on and support. For the sake of the devolution settlement and to ensure that we get some sort of solution to everything that we need to get fixed, they should back us tonight, stand up for Scotland and make sure that these amendments are passed.

John Lamont: I will speak to the measures that relate to Scottish devolution, particularly clause 11, which we have heard so much about during this debate. However, before I do so, I want briefly to talk about my role in this process, and indeed that of other Scottish Conservative and Unionist Members here and in the Scottish Parliament. Our job is to ensure that the Bill is in a form that will ensure that the Scottish Parliament can give its approval through the legislative consent procedure. It is fair to say that without a legislative consent motion, the Brexit process will shudder to a halt and create a constitutional crisis. It is therefore imperative that the consent of the Scottish Parliament is achieved.

Mrs Moon: Will the hon. Gentleman give way.

John Lamont: No, I just want to make a little bit of progress.

Although I do not support the amendments proposed by the Scottish and Welsh Governments—I will try to outline my reasons why—I do think that the UK Government need to do more to find a way forward with the devolved Administrations. The leader of the SNP here, the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), completely misjudged the tone of the debate. Peddling lines about “power grabs” when the complete opposite has clearly been stated to be the case really was staggering. Moreover, I was astonished that the hon. Members for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) and for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) seemed to be supporting the Scottish Government’s amendments, which would do so much harm to the integrity of the UK internal market and to Scotland’s place in the United Kingdom, given that so many of their voters voted overwhelmingly for Scotland to remain part of the United Kingdom in 2014.
Christine Jardine: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that I and, I hope, the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) are doing what we believe is necessary to protect the devolution settlement? By doing so, we are doing much more to protect the United Kingdom than the Conservatives, who may actually be undermining it.

John Lamont: It is my colleagues on the Government Benches who have made the Scottish Parliament as powerful as it is today. The Scottish Secretary has given a guarantee that, after Brexit, the Scottish Parliament will have even more powers. The problem with the amendment that the hon. Lady intends to support is that it goes too far. It would harm the internal market of the United Kingdom and undermine Scotland’s place in the United Kingdom. I do not believe that that was what the voters of Edinburgh West or of Edinburgh South voted for when they voted for their MPs, with their Unionist credentials, back in June.

Mrs Moon: I just find this debate absolutely ironic. We talk about the power of the devolved Assemblies at a time when one individual, in a quick phone call with the Prime Minister, can scupper the whole plans for devolution. Nobody from the Democratic Unionist party is in the Chamber to argue the whole plans for devolution. Nobody from the Prime Minister, can scupper the whole policy and the whole plans for devolution. From where is that coming from? From the right hon. Gentleman opposite. I think he needs to reflect on the fact that the two referendums in recent years, the one which I supported to stay in the European Union and the other which the SNP Members would like to happen again, were the democratic right of the Scottish people, whom he represents in his constituency. The amendments that we are going to table seek to stop the Scottish Parliament from deciding its own future. That is not acceptable in a democracy. We need to accept the result and move on.

Ian Murray: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for allowing me to correct his inaccurate record. He talked about my constituents in Edinburgh South. I should know them better than he does, and they voted 68% to 32% to keep Scotland in the United Kingdom. There is no greater defender of that United Kingdom than me, but perhaps he would like to reflect on the fact that the danger to the United Kingdom is Brexit and English votes for English laws. He stood on a manifesto saying that he would not only maintain the single market and the customs union, but enhance them.

7.15 pm

John Lamont: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that point. I will leave it to him to explain to his constituents why, by pressing his amendment, he will be putting at risk Scotland’s place in the United Kingdom. The amendment would damage the internal market of the United Kingdom and Scotland’s place in the United Kingdom. We are not supporting it because it goes too far. As my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) explained, we want to amend the Bill, but we will not do so if it puts Scotland’s place within the United Kingdom at risk. The amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Edinburgh South would do that, and that is something that we will be reminding his voters of.

I come to this debate as someone who was disappointed with the result of the referendum in 2016, but I am also a democrat. We need to accept the result and move on to ensure that we get the best outcome possible for Scotland and the United Kingdom. SNP Members would do well to show a degree of acceptance of that, too. They have been on the losing side of two referendums in recent years, but they seem to be unable to accept the result of either.

Our job now is to deliver Brexit smoothly and in a legally coherent way. That is why the Bill is so important. It is horrified complicated—I expect that most people in our country do not really understand what it is all about—and it could affect many aspects of our everyday lives, particularly in constituencies in parts of our country that are also governed by devolved Parliaments and Assemblies. Rather than focusing on the detailed wording of each clause, my approach has been to focus on outcomes. What do Scottish residents living in the border communities that I represent want to achieve from this process? What do Scottish farmers believe to be important? What do Scottish businesses and traders want from leaving the EU? What do our fishermen want to see on the other side of Brexit day? Ultimately, they all want as little disruption as possible. They want to be able to trade, move, and work within Scotland’s most important trading partner—the rest of the United Kingdom.

Stephen Doughty: Given the concerns that the hon. Gentleman is raising about many issues and the complexity that he is describing, is he not surprised to hear that, in recent moments, the statement that the Prime Minister was due to give to the House tomorrow about the negotiations and these matters of devolved Administrations has apparently been cancelled? The Prime Minister will not be coming here. Does he not agree that she should come to this House to explain just what is going on with these negotiations?

John Lamont: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I will not get involved in a running commentary on what he has been reading on Twitter. I look forward to hearing what the Prime Minister has to say when she is ready to speak to us. My priority from Brexit is twofold. My first priority is to protect the integrity of the UK internal market, which is worth four times more to Scottish businesses than that of the European Union. The other priority is to get the best possible access to the EU market. That, I believe, is also the priority of SNP colleagues, although there are differences over how we define the word “possible”.

The amendments proposed by the Scottish and Welsh Governments would, I believe, put the United Kingdom internal market at risk, which is why I cannot support them. By automatically devolving powers, they would place unnecessary barriers to trade between Scotland and the rest of the UK, our largest market. While accepting the need for common frameworks, the Scottish Government’s approach seems to be that everything should be devolved on day one and there should then be a process of trying to re-reserve powers to Westminster at a later date once we know what trade agreements require a UK-wide approach. That approach would bring an extra layer of uncertainty at an already uncertain time.
Martin Whitfield: Does not the hon. Gentleman agree that these powers have already been devolved? We are talking about powers coming back that have already been devolved, rather than something fresh and new.

John Lamont: These powers are with the European Union just now. We all accept that there will be a need for UK-wide framework agreements, and we need to get the process right. Why rush into devolving everything to the Scottish Parliament when the framework agreements might require powers to be retained at a UK level to protect the UK internal market, and to allow us to enter into trade agreements with other countries around the world? It is critical that we get things done in a logical and thoughtful way, rather than rushing into a situation that we might be unable to unpick further down the line.

Stephen Kerr: Does my hon. Friend agree that there are many moving parts in the current process? Our debate is taking place at a time when many things are on the move. For example, there was a very positive meeting last week between representatives of Scotland’s two Governments. Does my hon. Friend welcome that, and does he believe, as I do, that we should be optimistic that we can come up with an agreement based on some of the things that the Scottish Affairs Committee mentioned in its report?

John Lamont: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Significant progress is being made between the two Governments, which was why I was so disappointed with the opening remarks of the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber. There is not a million miles between the two Governments.

Christine Jardine: But does the hon. Gentleman accept that this is not just about how well Scotland’s two Governments are talking to each other? It is also about Wales and Northern Ireland—it is about each devolution settlement. We should not expect the situations in Wales and Northern Ireland—to be dependent on the outcome of talks between Scotland’s two Governments.

John Lamont: I accept that the UK Government are holding discussions with the other parts of the United Kingdom, but I am here to represent a Scottish constituency and my Scottish constituents. I would not be doing my job properly if I did not focus on Scotland and the challenges that Brexit will present there.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

John Lamont: I want to make a little bit more progress.

I completely reject the Scottish Government’s unhelpful narrative in the early stages of this process—we have heard it from some who have spoken today—that there is a power grab. No powers that are currently exercised by the Scottish Parliament will be reserved to the Westminster Parliament. Every decision that the Scottish Parliament could have taken before Brexit will still be possible after March 2019. The Scottish Parliament will, in fact, be given greater powers as we leave the European Union. This Bill maintains the current powers of the Scottish Parliament. It merely replaces the restriction on legislating contrary to EU law with the restriction on legislating contrary to EU retained law.

Chris Elmore: I am beyond confused by the hon. Gentleman’s assumption that we would reserve the powers that come back from the EU here on the basis of trade deals. The hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) is shaking his head, but the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) did say that the powers would be reserved based on trade negotiations. As a Welsh MP, I want to know whether the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk is saying that this British Parliament is to forfeit Welsh lamb in favour of Trump’s chicken. Will he clarify what he means by the powers being reserved based on trade?

John Lamont: My comments relate to the UK-wide framework agreements, on which I thought there was cross-party agreement. We need the framework agreements to protect the integrity of the UK internal market’s operations. As we progress out of Brexit, we will enter into trade deals with other countries, and it is important that the United Kingdom as an entity can offer one approach—common standards—in those negotiations. That will be good for Scottish business and for our constituents, and it is one reason why the framework agreements are so important.

Ian Murray: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

John Lamont: I just want to make a little more progress.

The UK Government have made it crystal clear that clause 11 is temporary until powers can be devolved. It is simply wrong to suggest that the Bill is some sort of power grab by Westminster. I suggest that this is just another chapter in the SNP’s book of grievance politics.

Joanna Cherry: The hon. Gentleman makes a point about the power grab, but he needs to understand that this phrase is not just used by the SNP. As I said earlier, it was first used by the former British Prime Minister, Gordon Brown. Government Members have been surprised that I am quoting Gordon Brown, but the Conservative and Unionist party needs to understand that all the Scottish parties—apart from the Conservatives—are united in their desire to protect the devolution settlement. The hon. Gentleman is describing what he hopes will happen, but clause 11 will not enable that to happen, because it involves top-down imposition, rather than organic upwards agreement.

John Lamont: The hon. and learned Lady is misrepresenting the Scottish Conservative and Unionist party’s position. We are completely committed to devolution. We have delivered more powers to the Scottish Parliament than any other party in this Chamber and we will continue to do so after Brexit. It is completely disingenuous to suggest anything else.

Joanna Cherry: On a point of order, Mr Crausby. The hon. Gentleman has used the word “disingenuous”. We have already heard from the Chair once today that that word ought not to be used about another hon. Member. I very much hope that the hon. Gentleman is not suggesting that I am being disingenuous. We might disagree, but I am not being disingenuous. I invite him to withdraw the comment.
The Temporary Chair (Sir David Crausby): The hon. Gentleman should not have used the word “disingenuous”. I am sure that he will learn from it.

John Lamont: I will learn, Mr Crausby, and I am happy to withdraw the remark.

The hon. and learned Lady said that the Scottish Conservative and Unionist party was in some way not supportive of devolution, which is just not the case. She has given me the opportunity to repeat my point: this party has delivered more powers to the Scottish Parliament than any other party in this Chamber, and it will continue to do so after Brexit.

Joanna Cherry: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

John Lamont: No; I think I have heard quite enough from the hon. and learned Lady this evening. Despite the rhetoric of the Scottish National party, the opposite is in fact true, as the UK Government and the Scottish Government are relatively close to reaching an agreement.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it would be of better service to all our constituents if we dialled down the rhetoric and looked closely at the positions that we all hold? We all agree that we need some common frameworks, and we all agree that the JMC and bilateral negotiations are the right way to make progress. Does he agree that we need to let the negotiations progress so that they can inform future changes to the Bill?

John Lamont: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Both sides agree on the need for common frameworks. As I listened to the Scottish Government’s Michael Russell and the Secretary of State for Scotland speaking yesterday, it was clear that significant progress has been made in the discussions between the two Governments, which is to be welcomed.

I also welcome the clear statement from the Secretary of State for Scotland that the UK Government’s default position will be devolution in policy areas that are already devolved, and that common frameworks must be agreed, not imposed on the devolved Administrations. The problem with the SNP’s demands is that they would rush a complicated process. I do not support an arbitrary timetable for listing what will be devolved and what needs to be dealt with on a UK basis until that has been agreed between the two Governments. I hope that we can proceed in a constructive way to achieve that. Although the Government are right to take their time, we do need further clarity from them on such matters during the progress of the Bill. In particular, we need more information about the areas in which common UK-wide frameworks are likely to be required.

Finally, it is absolutely not constructive—internally and within the EU—to have the threat of a second independence referendum hanging over the Brexit negotiations. We have seen the front pages of the Scottish press this morning, with the First Minister again talking about the case for independence. I see some SNP Members nodding enthusiastically. This is creating an extra layer of uncertainty for businesses in Scotland and making the task of negotiating with the EU even more difficult.

Ian Murray: It seems as if the hon. Gentleman is coming towards the end of his speech. Before he does, will he clarify a matter for the Committee? Is he saying that if something is part of a UK-wide trade deal, it will remain reserved to this place even though it is devolved under schedule 5 to the Scotland Act 1998?

John Lamont: If the two Governments agree that a power is required for the framework, that is the type of power that will have to be retained. That will protect the integrity of the UK market and allow our country to do trade deals with other countries of the world, but it will be an agreed position. That is why the discussions between the Scottish Government and the UK Government are so important. That is why I have said throughout my speech that I believe significant progress has been made to get to this point, which I certainly welcome.

I urge the SNP to put the national interest first and to work more constructively with the UK Government to achieve what we all want, which is the best outcome for Scotland and the United Kingdom from leaving the EU. I look forward to working with my colleagues in the UK Government to ensure that this Bill works for Scotland and for my constituents in the Scottish borders.

7.30 pm

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): In the past few weeks, we have spelled out many reasons why this Bill will leave the UK worse off in terms of human rights, workers’ rights, animal rights and environmental protections. However, it is designed to leave our devolved Governments and Parliaments worse off too.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I entirely agree with the speech my hon. Friend has made so far. [Laughter.] I am sure I will agree even more as it develops further. She talks about the devolved Administrations, but is the truth not that this Bill also denudes this Parliament of powers through a number of Henry VIII clauses?


Wales voted for a devolved Government 20 years ago. I was part of that campaign, and I was proud to see the then UK Labour Government bring that about. We now see a more successful and confident Wales than we did two decades ago, but I fear that we are about to go backwards. The Tories have made it clear that, when it comes to devolution, they just do not get it. Anyone who understands the basics of devolution can tell you that this Bill is taking us backwards. The powers devolved to Wales must stay in Wales.

Clearly, the issue is one of trust—trust to exercise devolved powers responsibly, trust to carry out measures that represent the people of Wales and trust to provide meaningful scrutiny of legislation. However, why should we in Wales trust a UK Government that are leading us to such a shambolic Brexit? As it stands, after Brexit, the devolved Governments will be at the mercy of Whitehall.

Stephen Kerr: The hon. Lady’s remarks lead me to conclude that there seems to be no basis, in her mind, on which Wales’s two Governments can get together and make agreements, but there has to be trust. We have to have some basic trust between our levels of Government
—otherwise, we will not be able to progress. Surely she is not advocating constitutional confrontation rather than consensus.

Anna McMorrin: I think we are seeing the beginnings of a constitutional crisis right now actually. [Interruption.] I will go on to explain if the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) will let me.

After Brexit, devolved Governments will be at the mercy of Whitehall mandarins with complete control over the time, place, method and future of the repatriation of powers from Brussels. We need only an elementary understanding of how institutions and Governments work to understand that this is leading us to a constitutional crisis.

Devolution is one of our country’s great strengths. The last 20 years have shown devolution to be a success, with our Governments in Wales and Scotland able to forge their own distinct paths with confidence. Decisions about Wales are best made in Wales by the people of Wales. This is not an argument for nationalism, but one for democracy. Governments formed here in Westminster are not best placed to dictate what happens in Wales.

This Bill lets down the constitutional settlement and the people of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. First, as drafted, clause 11 places a new and significant constraint on the devolution settlement and shifts the power dynamic around setting common UK frameworks firmly in the direction of the UK Government. As yet, the UK Government have provided no information on how these common frameworks will be put together between the Governments. [Interruption.] No, that is what it says in this report.

Stephen Kerr: I am afraid that what the hon. Lady is saying is just not true. The excellent report produced by the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee reproduces in full the agreement from October—just a couple of months ago—which spells out exactly how these common frameworks will be put together between the Governments. [Interruption.] Well, the hon. Gentleman should speak to the Chair and to other Conservative Members about that.

The situation is further complicated by the fact that, in a number of EU policy areas, the UK Government are in fact acting as the Government of England.

Mr Jenkin: I am most grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way—I know she is trying to get on with her speech.

Yes, we published the conclusions of the last Joint Ministerial Committee in our report because they, I think, do show the good faith of the Government. However, I also understand why people have doubted the good faith of the Government—because clause 11 is so bald, if I may say so. We need reassurances around clause 11 that do not necessarily change the substance of it but give assurance that there will be a process and a timetable. That would certainly be a good step.

Anna McMorrin: I thank the hon. Gentleman, and I agree absolutely that we need far more information on how the common frameworks will be agreed, the timetable for agreeing them, and what is involved in the processes.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): But the very fact that there is no timetable surely gives weight to the argument that what we are seeing here is a crude power grab.

Anna McMorrin: I thank my hon. Friend, and I completely agree. That is what I am saying in my speech—that this is an absolute power grab to the centre and away from the devolved Administrations.

Paul Flynn: My hon. Friend is being extremely generous in giving way.

Could we take a practical example of what will happen? The Welsh Government have wisely introduced a law on presumed consent for organ donation—it is settled, and it has saved 40 lives. The United Kingdom Government have not introduced such a law, and England has lost 400 lives. Scotland is in the process of introducing such a law, but the power it has to do that is being grabbed back here. Will that kill people in Scotland? That is an example of this legislative paralysis, which is taking away Scotland’s powers to do something that is much needed.

Anna McMorrin: Absolutely. I completely agree. That just shows that what we have here in a number of policy areas is a constitutional crisis emerging and the UK Government acting as the Government of England, not the Government of the UK, leading to a number of possible conflicts of interest when it comes to imposing pan-UK structures.

Secondly, it is crucial that Welsh Ministers and the Welsh Parliament are responsible for correcting and amending all areas of EU law that are devolved. Restricting involvement means taking away powers that have been devolved for 20 years and creates an inequality between the nations of the UK, as has just been described by my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn). That endangers the proper functioning of any UK single market—one of the main aims of this Bill.

We have seen the mess the Prime Minister is making of these negotiations, and we have seen the mess today. She is held to account by a small minority party—the DUP—and we have seen that this afternoon in the negotiations. A hard Brexit or no deal would seriously challenge devolution, as well as risking the Union. As a devolutionist who wants the UK to stay together, I think these issues are likely to cause the UK to begin to unravel. The UK Government must take responsibility.

Finally, the UK Government know they cannot win this. They may be able to whip their Members here in the House of Commons, but they cannot whip their Members in the Lords. Those Members are determined to expose what this Government are doing and will not let them off lightly.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Like the hon. Lady, I represent a constituency in a devolved part of the United Kingdom. Many in the House believe that clause 11 should be amended and have put their point to the Government, but will she work
constructively with the Government and be specific—not fan the flames of nationalism, which we all know are at play and could undermine our United Kingdom?

Anna McMorrin: As the hon. Gentleman knows, I am not fanning any flames of nationalism; I am talking about democracy in this place and the democracy of the UK. The Welsh Government have tried on many occasions to negotiate with the UK Government. That has not been possible, so we have the opportunity to vote with our Front Bench on these amendments.

Chris Elmore: My hon. Friend makes the point that Conservatives with constituencies in devolved parts of the UK should vote with us this evening. The Welsh and Scottish Governments have been saying for years that the JMC should be put on a statutory footing. That would build trust between the Government and the Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish legislatures. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Anna McMorrin: Yes. It is so important that structures and discussions are formally put in place across the country.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): I recall that during the passage of the Wales Bill last year we specifically asked for the JMC to be put on a statutory footing. The Government said no.

Anna McMorrin: The Government will probably see the error of their ways as the Bill passes through the Lords and they lose there. My advice is that the Government should avoid any more embarrassment, listen to our devolved nations and amend the legislation before it is too late.

Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): On 23 June last year, I voted, like more than 1 million Scots and more than 17 million Britons, to leave the European Union. I did not take that decision lightly; the caricature of leave voters as romantic zealots with no regard for our economy could not be further from the truth. Brexit is a practical decision, and I believe that the United Kingdom will be better off, and less exposed to risk, by taking control of its own destiny and trading with partners around the world, rather than becoming increasingly tied to the whims and fortunes of the European Union.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Jack: I will make some progress, if I may. Voting remain was a leap of faith that I could not take. I am not here to call for chaos; in fact, it is crucial to the short-term success of Brexit that we disengage from the EU with as little disruption as possible. That is why I support the Government’s plan for a time-limited implementation period after exit day. It is also why I support the Bill, which ensures that the statute book will continue to operate normally on exit day. We have a whole future ahead of us in which to use the controls that we will gain from Brexit to reform the laws and regulations in agriculture, fisheries and so on. At present, the focus should be on ensuring that the process of Brexit runs smoothly. The Bill recognises that.

For me, that approach extends to our devolution settlement in Scotland. We all expect the Scottish Parliament to become more powerful as a result of Brexit, but it is vital that we have secured common frameworks that ensure that the Union continues to function properly after Brexit. The Scottish Government, I hasten to point out, agree—and I commend them for that.

I call on both of Scotland’s Governments to come to a quick agreement. Scots deserve clarity in advance about exactly which powers will rest with Holyrood and which with Westminster after Brexit. The amendments to clause 11, proposed by SNP, Labour and Liberal Democrat Members, do not help that process. Clause 11 preserves the current devolution settlement.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): One of the hon. Gentleman’s colleagues has just said that he wants specifics about clause 11, while another says that the Conservative party respects the devolution settlement. Can the hon. Gentleman explain what it is about amendment 72—

“This section shall not come into effect until… the Scottish Parliament… the National Assembly for Wales… and… the Northern Ireland Assembly has passed a resolution approving the provisions”—that does not respect the devolution settlement or support his position?

7.45 pm

Mr Jack: I will come to that. That is going to happen anyway—by legislative consent motion.

Clause 11 preserves the current devolution settlement. Holyrood will not be stopped doing anything that it can do now, and nor will it automatically become able to do anything that our current EU membership stops it doing. This is simple and easy to understand, and it provides a solid basis for the talks currently taking place over which EU powers will be devolved.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I think the hon. Gentleman misunderstands what is happening. At the minute, the EU has legislative competence in 111 devolved areas, to ensure compatibility with the treaty on European Union. After Brexit, that will not be the case; what is being proposed is that the UK Parliament should be given legislative competence over these devolved areas that it currently does not have. That is a material change and constraint on devolution.

Mr Jack: That is correct—that is what we are negotiating about. The 111 powers are already devolved at implementation level. That exists at the moment. The question is about where the frameworks sit in respect of the powers that come back from the EU. We have to look at our internal market and how we would better run our country.

On issues such as food standards, it makes complete sense for us to have one framework for the United Kingdom, so that everyone can participate in the trade deals that we do. If we had different rules and regulations in different parts of the United Kingdom, our overseas trade agreements and internal market would fall apart.

Hannah Bardell: The hon. Gentleman talks about different regulations. Surely he understands the desire in Scotland, which the votes cast in Scotland reflected, to stay in the single market and the customs union and
have the same rules and regulations. Only England and the other parts of the UK that leave may be threatened with different regulations.

**Mr Jack:** The United Kingdom voted to leave and we respect that democratic decision. Earlier, the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) said that the councils of Scotland were confused, that there was a lot for them to look at and that every council voted against. In 2014, I remember that 28 of 32 councils voted to stay in the United Kingdom. Hon. Members should respect that, just as I respect the decision taken by the United Kingdom to leave the European Union.

**Tom Brake:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Mr Jack:** I am going to make some progress. By the time we reach Report, I hope we will have a better idea about what common frameworks are needed and how Scotland’s two Governments, in Westminster and Holyrood, will work together to implement them. That is the clarity that Scottish businesses want and need.

Almost two-thirds of Scotland’s exports go to the rest of the United Kingdom. I represent Dumfries and Galloway, which is but a few miles from both England and Northern Ireland, so this matter is particularly important to my constituents. If the internal market of the United Kingdom is harmed, Dumfries and Galloway will be among the worst hit areas. That is why I believe the amendments to be pointless at best, and harmful at worst. The forthcoming round of post-Brexit devolution must be conducted in a clear, measured way, preserving the internal market of the United Kingdom.

**Christine Jardine:** I want to speak specifically to amendments 132, 133 and 134. Like many others before us today, they are designed to protect the integrity and powers of the devolved Administrations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland by removing the proposed bar on legislating inconsistently with the EU in each case. I have been disappointed that in this debate we have not been able to reach the consensus that members of the Scottish Affairs Committee and the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) mentioned on the frameworks. There has been no suggestion, as far as I have heard, that we do not all agree on the need for a framework—it is the devolution of the powers that we are concerned about. This Bill appears to facilitate a power grab by this Government that, in its own way, undermines the devolution settlement and the powers of the Scottish Parliament.

It may have amused SNP Members that, while in the past I have appeared to be critical of their Government, I am agreeing with them on many things today. For example, I have criticised their Government’s handling of Police Scotland, pointed to GP shortages, and highlighted plummeting standards in Scottish education. However, those are criticisms of an Administration and their policies. They have never been criticisms of the Scottish Parliament, of the exercise of its devolved powers, or of any other Administration’s ability to exercise devolved powers. This now represents the settled will of the people of Scotland.

**Stephen Kerr:** The hon. Lady is a member of the Scottish Affairs Committee, which took evidence from the Secretary of State for Scotland, who was adamant about the fact that there would be additional powers to the Scottish Parliament and about the fact that the existing powers would remain. In fact, this Bill cements those powers to the Scottish Parliament. What has she heard that makes her think anything to the contrary?

**Christine Jardine:** I will come on to that. As the hon. Gentleman himself has said, it is currently being negotiated between Scotland’s two Governments exactly what the framework and the powers would be, and until we have that assurance we cannot be absolutely sure.

Today I find myself in the strange position where I feel as though I have been transported back 25 or 30 years, to a time when the Opposition parties are all in favour of devolution and campaigning for devolution, and the Conservatives are needing to be persuaded.

**Stephen Kerr:** No!

**Christine Jardine:** No, that is how it is. The Conservatives are needing to be persuaded, even though they themselves admit that they are unhappy with aspects of clause 11. They are looking to their own Whips rather than to what might be best for the devolution settlement in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

We should not forget that the leave campaign argued that Brexit would lift restrictions and lead to Scotland gaining major powers, yet today we find ourselves considering a Bill that aims to modify and place restrictions on both the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly in relation to EU law. Surely we cannot allow this erosion of our democratic processes. I appeal to Conservative Members, particularly those who have served at Holyrood, to support us in this. Their party may not have originally supported devolution, but they, of all people, must recognise its significance today.

As part of the EU withdrawal process, Scotland’s two Governments are currently discussing where the powers returned from the EU should be vested and how the new frameworks should operate. Just as the 111 powers relating to Scotland are being discussed, the Welsh Government have a list of 64 powers that they feel could be vulnerable under this agreement. Both Administrations are looking to this place for amendments to the Bill that will ensure that they continue to have approval over the aspects that affect them. Indeed, only last month, Scotland’s First Minister stated that the Bill as it stands is not one that her Government would recommend for approval.

This is the specific point where I would take issue with the Conservative allegation that it is Opposition Members who are undermining the Union. If we do not put forward a Bill that can get a legislative consent motion in the Scottish Parliament, we threaten the very fabric of the agreement and throw ourselves into a constitutional crisis. I do not want to be responsible for that. It will undermine the Union in the same way that the Conservative Government’s actions in taking us out of the European Union with a hard Brexit will cost Scotland perhaps £30 billion and put 80,000 jobs at risk. Those are the threats to the United Kingdom, not the debate we are having here today.
Tom Brake: Would my hon. Friend also like to consider the threat to the United Kingdom that is represented by the debacle that is happening with the border between Ireland and Northern Ireland in the context of ensuring the coherence of the United Kingdom? Surely the Government are failing on that front as well.

Christine Jardine: My right hon. Friend makes a very good point. That is yet another example of how this Government are undermining the United Kingdom at every turn.

For Opposition Members, the drive is to protect the devolution settlement and potentially the stability of the United Kingdom. There are a number of other amendments that are similar to ours which we are happy to support, and we will not press ours to the vote. Our overriding priority is to get this Bill in shape so that there is no danger that when it goes to the Scottish Parliament it does not get that consent and we face the crisis that Opposition Members have worked so hard to avoid for the past five years.

Ross Thomson: This has been a very interesting debate. It has been quite extraordinary to hear some of the rhetoric from Opposition Members about power grabs. I do not care where that phrase originated. Whether it was Gordon Brown, Kezia in the jungle, or Patrick Harvie, the fact is that it is simply not true.

It is amazing that Opposition Members have found this new belief in sovereignty. Let us go back to some basic facts. For the past 40 years, the UK has ceded its sovereignty to the EU and its institutions, with literally thousands of pieces of legislation being imposed on the UK and all its nations, and our Parliament having no ability to scrutinise them—

Mike Gapes: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ross Thomson: No, I am just getting started.

There has been no ability to scrutinise them, amend them, or even reject them. Now, on the day that we leave the EU in March 2019, powers will be returned to the UK and the Scottish Parliament will become more powerful than it already is.

Mike Gapes rose—

Jo Stevens: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ross Thomson: No, thank you.

The Scottish Parliament will regain powers over agriculture, the environment and transport, for example. We have seen quite an astonishing level of hypocrisy from Opposition Members today. Where was the SNP’s belief in sovereignty when over the past 40 years laws were imposed on the people of Scotland by the EU without debate in this place, or over the past 20 years without debate in Holyrood?

Jo Stevens: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for letting me stop him in mid-flow. Has he never heard of the European Parliament?

Ross Thomson: I am aware of the European Parliament, which cannot reject the legislation that is imposed on it by unelected commissioners. This is about re-establishing democracy. The EU has nothing to do with democracy—it is a deficit in democracy. We are taking that back. Opposition Members should celebrate that fact.

Mike Gapes: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ross Thomson: No.

Mike Gapes rose—

The Temporary Chair (Sir David Amess): Order. We cannot have two Members standing at the same time. I do not think that the hon. Gentleman is giving way.

Ross Thomson: Thank you, Sir David.

There was no option for debate, and no opportunity to amend or even reject those laws. Where was SNP Members’ concern for sovereignty then?

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP) rose—

8 pm

Ross Thomson: I would like to make some more progress before I take an intervention.

SNP Members have manufactured the power grab argument in grievance, yet we have heard time and again from the First Minister, all the way along, that the position of the SNP is for full membership of the European Union. [Interruption.] There we go; we have had it confirmed again. The SNP’s position is to support full membership of the European Union for an independent Scotland. The argument that SNP Members are making today is completely false news, because they do not want a single one of the new powers that will come to Scotland. They want the EU to retain and maintain those powers.

Stephen Kerr: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech, as is characteristic of him. Does he agree that SNP Members here are not representative of the SNP Government in Scotland? The SNP Government are quite attracted to the idea of these additional powers and would quite like to have them, but SNP Members here are indulging in rhetoric.

Ross Thomson: My hon. Friend is right that the rhetoric of the SNP group in Westminster is very different from that of the SNP group in Holyrood.

Drew Hendry: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ross Thomson: No, I will answer this point first. It looks as though we are achieving a real consensus about the powers that will come to Scotland, but we have just heard the SNP’s heated rhetoric in this Chamber. I know the SNP group in Holyrood, because I worked with them, and I know that Alex Neil and some b Bashful others are very keen on Brexit and powers coming back to, and being exercised in, Holyrood. SNP Members in Westminster want those powers to lie with the EU, and they want the EU to retain and maintain full control over all those areas.

Given that the EU is still very much travelling in the direction of greater integration, the SNP will simply want to cede even more powers to the EU if they get their way and win a second independence referendum. Boy, we in the Conservative party will do everything to prevent that from happening. There is no power grab here; this is simply the SNP’s great power giveaway.

Drew Hendry: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?
Ross Thomson: The hon. Gentleman will want to hear this point, believe me. The SNP is only stronger for Brussels, while the Scottish Conservatives deliver for Scotland yet again with an even stronger Scottish Parliament. Perhaps the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford)—he has just come back into the Chamber; that is terrific timing—should reflect more on the comments in his speech. He says that the people of Scotland are sovereign. If that is the case, he should respect the sovereignty of the people of Scotland who said no to independence in 2014, and who rejected in 2017 the SNP’s premise of a second independence referendum. Unlike the SNP, Scottish Conservatives will continue to deliver for Scotland, and for its businesses, communities and people.

Ian Blackford: I should point out to the hon. Gentleman that, when we appeared in front of the Scottish electorate in 2016, we won a mandate to deliver a Scottish referendum if Scotland was dragged out of the EU, the single market and the customs union. Lastly, we have got 35 MPs; we won the election in Scotland.

Ross Thomson: In 2016, the SNP went into the election with a majority in Holyrood and lost it. The SNP now depends on the votes of the Greens to see through its legislation, its budget and a second independence referendum. The right hon. Gentleman mentioned the election in June. I do not know whether he has looked behind him, but 21 of his colleagues have gone missing, including the former leader of the SNP, Alex Salmond, and the party’s leader in Westminster, Angus Robertson. In that election, it was quite clear that the people of Scotland wanted to send the First Minister a message: “In 2014, we said no and we meant it.” That is why there are fewer SNP Members here than there were. There may be 35 of them, as the right hon. Gentleman says, but 13 Scottish Conservatives have achieved more for Scotland in five months in the last Budget than 56 SNP MPs ever did in two years.

I want to get back to my previous point. We will always stand up for Scotland’s businesses, communities and its people.

Drew Hendry: On that point, will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ross Thomson: I have literally just answered a point, so I will finish making this one. We will ensure that no barriers are created to trade within the UK. Even the SNP Scottish Government—including the Brexit Minister, Mike Russell—accept that there will have to be common UK-wide frameworks, because they are needed. That is reflected in the Scottish Affairs Committee report, as other colleagues have highlighted in the debate. We need common frameworks, because a UK single market or unitary market—whatever we want to call it—is our greatest asset and we need to maintain it. Where frameworks are needed to underpin the work of companies and individuals across all parts of our United Kingdom, we will make the case for such frameworks.

Luke Graham: Does my hon. Friend agree that, although the SNP always talks down Westminster, this is a great opportunity to talk up Holyrood and Westminster and use the common frameworks to find areas on which we can pull together and act as one great country?

Ross Thomson: My hon. Friend is right. Scotland has two Governments: the United Kingdom Government and the Scottish Government. I know from my own constituency that my residents like it when both Governments work together, rather than being at each other’s throats. We have co-operated on city deals, for example, to achieve something, and we need to see more of that, because my constituents are absolutely fed up with the back-biting.

Drew Hendry: On the subject of powers, does the hon. Gentleman still subscribe to what was written on the banner that he held outside the Scottish Parliament for the Vote Leave campaign? The banner urged people to vote “LEAVE the EU and give control of the Scottish fishing industry to our democratically-elected Scottish Parliament”.

Does he still agree that those powers should go to the democratically elected Scottish Parliament?

Ross Thomson: I am so grateful to the hon. Gentleman for bringing that up. By leaving the European Union, we can take back powers over fishing, and we will come out of the common fisheries policy. As we heard earlier in this debate, the SNP wants to take us straight back into the EU and therefore drag every fisherman in Scotland straight back into that very policy, selling Scotland’s fishermen out. That has been confirmed today, but the Scottish Conservatives, such as my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid), will stand up for Scottish fishermen and deliver a Brexit that works for them. I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving me the opportunity to say so.

Stephen Kerr: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for saying that the people of Scotland like it when Scotland’s two Governments work together. We have heard several times from SNP Members—not the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), whose speech was, I thought, rather positive—that negotiation and co-operation has not started. But the Select Committee’s report states: “We recommend that the UK and Scottish governments continue their efforts to secure agreement”.

“Continue” suggests that something has started, does it not?

Ross Thomson: I agree with everything that my hon. Friend has said. It is clear from this debate that I want these powers to come to the Scottish Parliament, but SNP Members want them to stay with the EU. I find it fascinating that I have a higher opinion of the ability of Nicola Sturgeon and her Cabinet to make decisions on such matters in Scotland than her own party in Westminster does. That really tells us something.

To continue with what I was saying, we will need UK-wide frameworks in areas such as food labelling.

Tom Brake: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ross Thomson: I want to make some more progress, please.

It would make no sense whatsoever to have four different sets of food labelling rules, because it would simply add to our companies’ costs and cause confusion for customers right across the UK. Common frameworks are needed to secure the functioning of the UK internal market, as my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire,
Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) said, while acknowledging policy divergence and ensuring that we comply with international obligations.

We cannot support the SNP’s proposal because of the danger that it poses to the integrity of the UK single market, and therefore to our United Kingdom. Let us be absolutely honest. Is it a surprise to anyone that the Scottish nationalist party would suggest something that would create barriers in our UK, in order gradually to break it up? Absolutely not. I gently urge our colleagues in the Scottish Liberal Democrats and Labour to be cautious, because the SNP’s amendments are simply a Trojan horse for the Scottish Government. We in the Scottish Conservatives will work constructively with our colleagues to achieve something better, and I am sure that the Government will reflect on what they have heard tonight.

**Tom Brake:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Ross Thomson:** No, thank you.

We need clause 11 to work for our United Kingdom—to protect it as well as enhancing our devolution settlement. It is in the interests of all our constituents that a deal is reached and an LCM is passed in the Scottish Parliament, so perhaps the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber should reflect on his pantomime performance earlier this afternoon. I know he is no longer in the Chamber, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) stated, the Scottish Conservative group will work constructively with our colleagues to help to support both of Scotland’s Governments in moving forward with a withdrawal Bill that will strengthen Holyrood and maintain the integrity of the UK.

In his speech, the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) spoke about having confidence in the UK Government. I actually have confidence not just in the UK Government, but in the Scottish Government because I believe they will come to a deal that will work for the whole of the United Kingdom and for Scotland’s place within it. I do not think we should act prematurely tonight because, as we know, there is an upcoming meeting of the JMC, and there is more to come from such a process. We will not support the amendments tonight because we are taking a constructive, productive approach that will actually deliver for Scotland, rather than playing the politics of grievance.

**Stephen Doughty:** It is a shame to follow the hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson), the tone of whose speech was in stark contrast to those of the more thoughtful colleagues who recognise the very serious problems with the Bill, and particularly with clause 11.

I absolutely assure the hon. Gentleman that I would not sign up to any Trojan horse for independence or for breaking apart the UK. I have been very happy to work together with Scottish National party Members and others on some of the amendments, but they know full well where my views stand on the Union, and we will not agree on that. We can absolutely agree, and I state this as a proud devolutionist, that we have a constitutional settlement that we have spent many years—20 years, in fact—establishing, and I am very proud to support it at all levels. If we throw apart that settlement, we do so at our peril. We are already seeing the chaos created after the negotiations in Brussels today, which is affecting parts of our economy because of the uncertainty for business. Do we really need to add to that uncertainty and chaos in the constitutional settlement of the UK and our islands? I do not think we do.

I rise to speak to amendments 182 and 186 to 188 in my name and those of the hon. Members for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins), for Arfon (Hywel Williams), for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson), and for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), the right hon. Members for Carrick, Cumnock and Wallhead (Tom Brake), for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) and for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) and my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray). I support the amendments tabled on behalf of the Welsh and Scottish Governments, and I also add my support to new clauses 64 and 65 tabled by the Opposition, as well as amendment 72 tabled by the Scottish National party—I have put my name to it as well—about legislative consent motions, and the important amendment 337 about transitional arrangements. We will not be speaking much about transitional arrangements today, but they affect the devolved settlements as much as they do many other parts of the Bill.

Withdrawal from the EU represents a major constitutional upheaval for the United Kingdom. I spoke and voted against the Bill on Second Reading, and the Committee will already be aware of my grave concern with the proposed sweeping powers that Ministers intend to gift themselves, bypassing Parliament and in effect subverting the long-established principle that legislative power and sovereignty is in the purview of this Parliament.

The Government are seeking to subvert not just this House, but the elected—duly democratically elected—Governments of the United Kingdom. The amendments I have tabled with other Members seek to protect the devolution settlement. I have with me the various Acts pertaining to Wales. A serious amount of work, effort and consideration has gone into them over 20 years. They are not perfect—they do not necessarily get everything right or include what I and others would like—but they have been developed with the advice and consent of the Welsh people, as have the other settlements with the people of Scotland and of Northern Ireland. They have also been developed by Members of this House, including many Members from across England who take a keen interest in such matters, not least when they relate to the internal borders of the United Kingdom and the differences that may exist.

Although far from perfect, the legislation laid down in law the permanency of the National Assembly for Wales as part of our constitutional arrangements. I am now incredulous that Ministers are seeking to undermine the ability of Ministers of the Crown in Wales, and indeed Scotland, by allowing Whitehall Ministers to pass swathes of secondary legislation in policy areas that it has been long established are administered from Edinburgh and Cardiff Bay.

For those who do not know, the National Assembly is in the heart of my Cardiff South and Penarth constituency, and I take a great interest in that body. I worked there in its early days—in fact, on the first few days after it opened—and like many of the more recently elected Welsh Members in this House, I have spent time in and around both Welsh and UK institutions and I
recognise the importance of the settlement we have and how it works for the people of Wales, as indeed it does for Scotland.

8.15 pm

Common frameworks on some policy areas, such as fisheries, could be beneficial to all four nations, but surely Welsh and Scottish Ministers should be equal partners and retain the right to withhold consent. The Government at Westminster have no democratic legitimacy to dictate policy. We have often been told by Ministers in this House that they are merely seeking to implement the result of the June 2016 referendum, but do Government Members really feel that there are two categories of referendums—those that can be ignored and those that have to be obeyed to the letter of what was set out?

I remind Members on both sides of the House that, as we have seen with referendums in Scotland and elsewhere, we have had two referendums in Wales—the one that brought into existence the National Assembly and, more recently, the one that increased powers and changed legislative mechanisms. There is a wider issue with the UK Government that, sadly, has been reflected in the negotiations on this Bill. There are simply some parts of the UK Government in Whitehall that still, 20 years on, do not appear to take devolution seriously. In fact, the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) said during the Conservative party conference this year that “we still have to get the cabinet secretary to put pressure on departmental permanent secretaries to take devolution seriously”. To my regret, it seems obvious that the Department for Exiting the European Union has yet to be one of the Departments that takes devolution seriously.

Fundamentally, this is about respect. It is about respect for the people of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. It is about respect for democracy and the democratic process. There is not just one form of democracy in these islands; there are many forms, and we need to respect them all equally. It is about respect for the different pieces of legislation that we have passed in this place, the different referendums we have had and the settlement that we have established.

As I have said, none of us wants to be in a situation where we repeatedly end up in the Supreme Court, debating and arguing in front of judges about these areas. That is why it is so important to get this right. We have heard some very interesting speeches from Scottish Conservative Members, and I know there are Welsh Conservative Members—I have just mentioned one—who have concerns about where current legislation sits at the moment. There are many views in this place, but the reality is that whether we were for leave or remain and whichever model we see Brexit ending up with—I know where I think it should end up—we are all absolutely clear that we need to keep the constitutional settlement stable and that we do not want to see cases constantly referred to the courts, which would waste hundreds of thousands of pounds of taxpayers’ money in disputes. I do not say that in a hypothetical sense, because it has happened already in a number of areas. It has happened in relation to the Agricultural Wages Board in Wales, and we are seeing it in the Government’s claim that they are going to try to undermine the Trade Union (Wales) Act 2017, which was recently passed by the Welsh Assembly. I very much fear for the future if we do not get such constitutional arrangements right.

I therefore urge Ministers on the Front Bench—some of them have Welsh connections, even though they may not represent Welsh constituents—to listen very carefully to the amendments, which have been put forward with great care by the Welsh and Scottish Governments and by those of us who support them in this House. They are based on substantial legal advice about the Bill and its current deficiencies. I gently say to Ministers that if we do not see some concessions, acceptance and respect in relation to the amendments, they will undoubtedly find that others are talked on Report and in the other place—and rightly so, because the Bill seeks to undermine the existing settlement.

Let me speak in a little more detail about clause 11 and some of my concerns about it. I want to return to the Prime Minister’s comments when she spoke to the Scottish Conservative conference on 3 March. She said: “We must take this opportunity to bring our United Kingdom closer together.” She also said that “we must avoid any unintended consequences for the coherence and integrity of a devolved United Kingdom as a result of our leaving the EU.” Those are fine words, but what about what we have seen not only today in the negotiations, but during our debates on this Bill? We have heard warm words from the Secretaries of State for Scotland and Wales about how they will listen, but they have yet to accept any amendments or to have detailed conversations through either the joint ministerial frameworks or the usual channels in this place. That is what is causing the fear, concern and consternation among many Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish Members. The Government expect us just to trust them that everything will be okay and all right on the night, but we have seen today what a mess that can put us in. I am not willing to see Wales and our legislature and democratically elected Assembly Members go through such uncertainty.

The White Paper, “Legislating for the United Kingdom’s withdrawal from the European Union”, states: “When the UK leaves the EU, the powers which the EU currently exercises in relation to the common frameworks will return to the UK, allowing these rules to be set here in the UK by democratically-elected representatives.” It does not refer only to democratically elected representatives in this place; it is talking about democratically elected representatives across the United Kingdom.

I am a fan of this Parliament and I think it is given far too hard a time on occasions, but we could learn a lot from the processes and procedures of the National Assembly and, indeed, the Scottish Parliament. For example, rather than seeking Henry VIII powers like this place—we wait with interest to see whether the Government will make concessions on those amendments—the Welsh and Scottish Governments have already made it clear that they will not operate in the same untransparent and unconsultative way as Ministers here currently seem to want to operate.

The Government’s White Paper also made it very clear that there would be “significant increase in the decision making power of each devolved administration”
and that the frameworks would be subject to decisions by their democratically elected representatives. Why, therefore, do we find ourselves in a situation in which the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales have, rightly, described the Bill as a “power grab” and have had to draw attention repeatedly to the democratic mandates of their own institutions? Indeed, as has been pointed out by many Members across the House, they have made it clear that they are unlikely to pass the necessary legislative consent motions, given the failure to address their concerns. As we have heard, we are not talking about hypothetical scenarios; we are talking about the 111 returning powers that relate to devolved matters in Scotland, and the 64—or, indeed, even more; there are different analyses of the situation—that relate to Wales.

The First Ministers issued a joint statement, saying: “The European Union (Withdrawal) Bill does not return powers from the EU to the devolved administrations, as promised. It returns them solely to the UK Government and Parliament, and imposes new restrictions on the Scottish Parliament and National Assembly for Wales.”

It is not just the First Ministers saying that. We often refer in this place to the excellent and neutral work of the House of Commons Library. Indeed, I am drawing on its excellent work today, which looks at the issues from a dispassionate and neutral point of view. I am also drawing on reports by research institutions in the National Assembly for Wales and the Scottish Parliament.

Indeed, a report by the Welsh Assembly research service points to a number of inferior powers for Welsh institutions under the Bill. I think that has led to a lot of the reactions we have seen. A paper by the research service made it very clear that the Bill “imposes a ‘freeze’ on the legislative competence of the National Assembly for Wales and other devolved parliaments. Essentially, the Assembly will still have to legislate within the bounds of EU law, as it existed immediately before the UK withdraws…This restriction will continue for an indefinite period…this means that the UK Government and Parliament could remove former EU rules for England, whereas the Assembly would not be able to do so for Wales.”

It is crucial to show up such inconsistencies.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is making a good speech showing up the deficiencies of the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament. Does he agree that current events show the vastly advantageous situation in which Ireland finds itself? Its Parliament is not dependent on this place but is actually pulling the strings and telling this place what to do, and this place has to listen.

Stephen Doughty: I do not want to get too drawn into conversations about the state of the negotiations. I have already said that they are absolutely shambolic. Members from Northern Ireland are present and I am sure that they will contribute, if they wish to do so, and there will be a great number of debates on Wednesday. I am absolutely clear, however, that Wales should not be treated less favourably than any other part of the United Kingdom. I am sure that Scottish Members would say the same about Scotland. Whether that relates to debates about remaining in the single market and the customs union—I believe that we should do so—or to other areas of legislative competence or to funding, about which this place has had many lively debates, Wales deserves to be treated as an equal. The First Minister, Carwyn Jones, is absolutely right to have made that absolutely clear this evening, given the shambolic events in Brussels today.

To return to the advice given to Assembly Members, its chief legal adviser has said that the Bill means that, effectively, “London could step in and make law for Wales on devolved matters”.

The Bill does not stipulate that that would be subject to the agreement of the Welsh Government or the Assembly. In some cases—I am trying to be charitable—constitutional conventions, such as the Sewel convention, would apply, but the reality is that we are expected to take these matters on trust, when we could be legislating for them and getting the Bill’s detail right.

David Rees, a Welsh Labour Assembly Member and Chair of its External Affairs and Additional Legislation Committee, has said: “If this Bill does seek to constrain the Assembly’s powers, then it could be seen as undermining devolution and the democratic will of the Welsh people, as expressed in the 2011 referendum on full law-making powers for Wales.”

When we talk about referendums, we need to be clear that they all have value and importance. We need to listen to them all, not just one, and not just interpret them as we see fit. Scottish colleagues have also said as much, with the Scottish Brexit Minister saying very clearly: “The current proposals are a direct threat to the devolution settlement which the people of Scotland overwhelmingly voted for”.

We are talking about different mandates and our democracy; let us make sure that we listen to all parts of that democracy, not just some of them.

The Library clearly states: “Matters of devolved competence are effectively reserved in this Act of UK Parliament…Devolved competence frozen…which will go out of date over time…No statutory basis for discussing and making new frameworks.”

That is why Labour Front Benchers’ new clauses 64 and 65 are so important. We need to give statutory effect to those frameworks, and we need clear guidance and processes. There is a small degree of disagreement among Members of different parties about their impact, but I will not dwell on that. It is clear that we need clear frameworks to debate and discuss these matters.

As currently drafted, clause 11 will amend both devolution Acts for Wales by inserting a new restriction on the competence of devolved legislatures. The Welsh and Scottish Governments consider that those provisions fundamentally cut across the principles of the devolution settlements, which is why the amendments that so many Members have signed would remove those restrictions in clause 11 and schedule 3.

I do not want to get into too much technical detail, but there is a crucial point to be made about the nature of Welsh devolution and how it has developed, particularly in the new Wales Act 2017, some parts of which have yet even to come into effect. I urge Ministers to look carefully at the sequencing. They do not seem to have thought through the commencement dates of different parts of the Act and how they relate to the Brexit process.

The question whether Wales would have reserved or conferred powers was at the heart of the debate about that Act. Mark Drakeford, a Welsh Government Minister, made some clear points about that in his evidence to the Assembly’s External Affairs and Additional Legislation
Committee. He said that, essentially, there would be a move backwards from the reserved powers model and that the areas set out in the Bill would be subject to conferred powers. He set out the case very clearly, and I hope that you will excuse me, Sir David, if I quote what he said:

“In the Welsh Government’s view, this is an extremely complex and confusing basis on which to construct a properly-functioning system of legislative devolution. Even if we agreed with the policy behind clause 11, we would have strongly to oppose the way the Bill impacts on the structural foundations of devolution, reversing as it does one of the gains for devolution which adoption of the Wales Act reserved powers model aims to create.”

This is the danger of the Brexit Bill process. Those who drafted the Bill seem to lack an understanding of devolution and the different ongoing processes. Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have much in common, but they are different. One big gain we achieved in the passage of the Wales Act was moving to a reserved powers model, which the Scottish Parliament and Government have enjoyed for some time. It seems absurd for that to be suddenly rolled back, changing and creating different categories when we have just set out what we thought was a settlement. That is an absurd situation.

8.30 pm

Hywel Williams: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. There is a good deal of agreement between us. He talks about the 2017 Act and some of the more abstract aspects that people listening in perhaps might not understand or follow, but there are practical and technical implications for children’s rights, the environment and so on. Does he not think that those aspects should be explored fully before we move to a vote? I certainly hope to do so.

Stephen Doughty: Absolutely. The danger of this place is that we sometimes get into the technical detail, but do not talk about the implications. Fundamentally, this is about where the Welsh Government and the Welsh Assembly have powers over the areas that affect many parts of our lives. When we talk about the impact of Brexit could have on the agricultural sector, transport and customs arrangements—look at the debate on Ireland and Northern Ireland today—we need to speak a lot more about how the maritime border between Wales and the Republic of Ireland could be completely messed up, and the effect of the shenanigans and chaos of today’s negotiations on the prospects for Welsh businesses, ports and hauliers. These are real things that affect real lives. They might seem obtuse within this place, but they have an impact in reality.

Finally, I want to reflect on what the Exiting the European Union Committee said in paragraph 77 of its recent report. It was very clear about the problem of trust, and I think that this gets to the heart of the matter. The Government expect us to trust them that everything is going to be okay; there will be no problems; this is all going to fine; and, as I said, it is going to be all right on the night. The Committee said:

“Whilst the Government has said that it plans to work with the devolved administrations to reach agreements on UK common frameworks, the devolved administrations have insufficient trust in the process for agreeing these...relationships and have, accordingly, indicated that they will withhold legislative consent from the Bill. The Government must improve engagement with the devolved administrations. It must reach an agreement with the devolved administrations, which might result in changes to the Bill, setting out how and when...competencies will be devolved.”

What surprises me about this process is that the Government have known about those concerns. They have heard them repeatedly from Welsh and Scottish Ministers. They clearly were not listening to the concerns of some of their Northern Irish colleagues; otherwise we would not have seen today’s mess.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Those concerns have been laid out by the Scottish Government for over a year now. Surely today’s actions by the UK Government show that if they can concede on Northern Ireland with regard to the customs union and the single market, despite the Democratic Unionist party vetoing that, they can make the same offer to Scotland and to Wales.

Stephen Doughty: I completely agree. The simple way to resolve all these issues would be for us to stay within the customs union and the single market, to stop messing about, get on with it and remove half the problems that will be created for Wales, Scotland and elsewhere. That is my very clear view.

What I cannot understand is that the Government have been told about these problems repeatedly by Welsh Government Ministers. They have been told about these problems repeatedly by the legal advisers in the devolved Administrations. They have been told about these problems repeatedly by Members of this House. They have had plenty of time to come up with some fixes. Some of these areas are really not that contentious. They are practical. They are not about wrecking the Bill or stopping Brexit; they are about making sure we keep a stable constitutional settlement in these islands.

And yet, where is the evidence that the Government have listened to any of it? So far, there is very, very little. In fact, the Secretary of State for Wales has barely been in here for the debate. Other Ministers have been here for longer. The Secretary of State for Scotland at least had the courtesy to take part in it and make some interventions. The Secretary of State for Wales has been completely absent, apart from about 20 minutes at the start of Bill. I do not think that that shows respect for the people of Wales and for the Members of the Welsh Assembly who have been putting these concerns forward. I sincerely hope that Ministers do listen and come up with fixes to these problems. Otherwise, I can tell them that they will have a very rocky ride on Report and in the other place and that they will have very little, if any, chance of getting the legislative consent motions, which they say they want to receive, from the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this lively debate. I am here to represent all my constituents as best I can, not just those who voted for me and not just those who voted in 2016 to leave. It has been estimated that approximately 54% voted to leave, but I also represent those who continue to have concerns about what will happen after we leave the EU. I appreciate the concerns expressed by many of my constituents, even if I do not necessarily always share them. I will come on to talk about why.
I can understand, to some extent, a certain level of cynicism towards the UK Government—of any Government—by our population. There seems to be a belief, however mistaken, that Scotland's best interests could be side-lined in the EU withdrawal process. The UK Government, however, are working with, not against, the devolved Administration in Edinburgh to deliver an outcome that works for the whole UK, including Scotland. It is about getting the best deal that works for Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland inside the United Kingdom—that is the key point I want to keep coming back to—so when the SNP and its supporters suggest that Scottish Conservative MPs somehow do not have the best interests of Scotland and the Scottish people at heart, I find that, quite frankly, offensive and insulting. Conservative Scottish MPs, as has been shown, speak up regularly for not only our constituents, but for Scotland as a whole.

I was surprised to hear so much mention of the so-called power grab, considering the amount of progress that has been reported between Ministers from both Scotland's Governments on that very topic. I was happy to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) quote Nigel Smith, who led the Scotland Forward campaign, that there is actually no power grab. The Bill is about continuity and certainly as much as it is about control. Powers that currently sit with Brussels will return to the UK, but we will still have devolution after Brexit. The devolved institutions, particularly the Scottish Parliament, will end up, through a period of systematic and methodical transition, with more powers than it currently holds. It will certainly have far more powers than if we followed the SNP's policy of staying in the EU.

The SNP wants the Scottish Government to have more powers, but it does not necessarily want to devolve those powers any further than Edinburgh. It would rather see powers go back to Brussels than to our rural and coastal communities, for example. It has two obsessions: independence and centralisation. [Interruption.] Scotland is far bigger than just the central belt. [Interruption.] It is nice of the SNP to join us.

The Joint Ministerial Committee on EU Negotiations, chaired by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, has provided the leaders of the devolved Governments with an opportunity to help to shape the UK's exit from the EU. This is important because there is a clear need for UK frameworks to protect the sectors of our economy most heavily influenced by EU laws.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Can the hon. Gentleman imagine any politician elected in the Republic of Ireland thinking that Ireland could not manage such matters itself, especially given what has happened today? Why does he require—demand, need—London to do this? Can he not stand on his own two feet and look at the world eye to eye? What is this puppy-dog need for London to sort it all out?

David Duguid: I do not recognise those concerns. As has been said by several hon. Members tonight, this is a matter of trust, and I accept that it is probably far easier for Scottish Members on the Government Benches to trust the Government to get on with the job of delivering the Bill as required.

As I said, the leaders of the devolved Governments have an opportunity to help shape the UK's exit from the EU. This is important because there is a universally recognised need for UK frameworks to protect sectors of our economy heavily influenced by EU laws, particularly agriculture and fisheries, which are very important to my constituency. It is universally recognised, including by the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly, that UK frameworks are necessary and must be established, not imposed, as has been mentioned. This should be done in full partnership with the UK Government. That recognition was shared in what I thought was quite a beautiful moment between the Secretary of State for Scotland and the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) in a recent meeting of the Scottish Affairs Committee.

Deidre Brock: The hon. Gentleman talks about devolved Administrations being involved in discussions, but none of them is involved in the negotiations themselves, because of the UK Government's decision to exclude them. Does he agree that in the end that was a big mistake?

David Duguid: The UK Government are interacting actively with the devolved Administrations, but it has to be recognised that it was the UK that voted to leave the EU and it is the UK that has the responsibility for the negotiations.

It is disappointing that the SNP is attempting to undermine the progress made by its Ministers in Holyrood on working towards UK-wide frameworks that work for Scotland. Despite the best efforts of SNP Members, the United Kingdom is still a united kingdom. To expect powers currently held by Brussels to devolve straight to the Scottish Parliament, without a transitional stage in between, is simply not practical or in Scotland's long-term interests. I say that as someone who believes that Scotland is better off in the Union, whether or not SNP Members agree.

In conclusion, I am confident, particularly given the bending of ears by my Scottish Conservative colleagues and me, that the Government will do right for Scotland. Devolution will be strengthened, not by these amendments.

Hywel Williams: It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid), who talked about the promise of more and better powers than the Scottish Parliament currently holds. I suppose the same goes for Wales, but the problem is the question of when, and how we can be sure. While he ruminates on that, perhaps I will get on with my speech.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Although the Tories might need to ruminate on that, clearly Leo Varadkar does not. He has the powers and he is using them.

Hywel Williams: Indeed. That was an instructive point for us all.

I rise to speak to Plaid Cymru’s amendments 90 to 92. I am pleased to have co-sponsored the similar joint Welsh and Scottish Government amendments although, for reasons that I will make clear, I prefer my own versions.
The UK constitution is unwritten—or at least it is not written down all in one place—and is constantly evolving. It has evolved in such a way that we no longer live in a one-Parliament state. The UK consists of four representative, governing and law-making bodies, not one. That might seem like stating the obvious but, as I noted in my speech on our first day in Committee, there is no operative Assembly in Northern Ireland, the Parliaments in Wales and Scotland are considered differently from this one in Westminster, and of course England is invisible, except that we accept at the very least that England is de facto represented by this place, which raises questions of conflicts of interest.

The point is that democracy and its values apply to all, not just to one, and devolution demands that all parts of the UK have a say, not just one. As Members will know, the devolution statutes operate through a reserved-powers model in which certain matters are listed as the UK Parliament’s responsibilities. That means that matters not explicitly reserved to the UK Parliament are within the competence of the devolved legislatures.

8.45 pm

The advantages of the reserved powers model are clear, and we argued for it exhaustively during the passage of what became the Wales Act 2017. It was, for Wales at least, a very live issue as recently as last year and the year before. The Wales governance centre at University College London has said that the model provides “greater certainty about law-making powers”, and that it “reduces the likelihood of referral of devolved legislation to the UK Supreme Court, promoting efficiency and improving accountability and engagement.”

The hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) mentioned that in his speech. We know, and at least some Conservative Members know, about the problems that arose from the constant referrals of Welsh cases to the Supreme Court, and about the costs and inefficiency that were involved.

Let me give the Committee another small example of the difficulties that the conferred powers model can create. This is a bit of a tangent, but it concerns a man who is in the news today, Mr Alan Milburn. When he was Secretary of State for Health, I asked him about nurses’ pay in Wales. He said—I quote him from memory—“It is one of the abiding joys of my life that I have no responsibility at all for things Welsh.” Apparently he was wrong, because although health was devolved, nurses’ pay was not. That is just a small example of the complications to which messing around with the reserved powers model might lead.

The reserved powers approach was endorsed by the UK Government following the long-drawn-out St David’s day process, on the grounds that “it would prove a more coherent, stable and better functioning day process, on the grounds that

Clauses 11 is just one provision of one Bill but, in effect, it reverses decades of devolution. As was mentioned by the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies) who is no longer in the Chamber, a small majority in Wales voted for the conferred powers model in the referendum in 1997. The reserved powers model was the subject of a much bigger positive vote in 2011.

The Scottish Government made their point in black and white in a legislative consent memorandum tabled on 12 September in which they explained that they could not recommend consent because the Bill creates further complexity in the devolution settlement by effectively grafting a conferred powers model—solely in retained EU law—on, and across, the reserved powers model. That complicates matters enormously.

Plaid Cymru’s amendment 91 adapts the restrictions placed on the National Assembly for Wales by the Bill so that they are applicable only to reserved areas of policy, allowing Wales to continue to legislate freely in devolved areas. In that respect, our amendment is much more modest than others that we are considering today, so I hope that, if the Government do not feel able to agree to it tonight, they will consider it carefully before Report. Our amendment differs from those tabled by the Welsh and Scottish Governments in that, rather than deleting the whole clause, we consciously and deliberately make an explicit reference to the reserved-powers model as enshrined in the Wales Act 2017. It is an extremely moderate amendment—it is the status quo. It shows that we are playing by the rules, and we expect Westminster to do the same.

As I said, we have also co-sponsored the joint Welsh and Scottish Government amendments on this matter. Giving UK Ministers control over areas of retained EU law that fall under devolved competence would normalise direct rule and undermine Welsh sovereignty. It would set a precedent that this and future UK Governments would find it difficult not to exploit whenever the Governments in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland act in a way with which they disagree. I speculate that it is something that people might eventually rue wishing for. These might be matters that eventually mean that England’s perceived interests are in conflict with those of the other parts of these islands.

The Prime Minister has, by the way, pledged never to “devolve and forget” again. Our hope is that if all Opposition parties unite, we can defeat this brazen power grab. Regrettably, however, that has not been the case so far. On 14 November, we in Plaid Cymru called a vote on our amendment to the effect that the Bill could not be signed without agreement between the devolved Administrations and the Westminster Government. One of the problems with things as they stand is that we do not know how that would be done, so we suggested that there must be agreement. Sadly, only one Labour MP managed to vote for our amendment—a vote in favour of the legitimacy and authority of the National Assembly for Wales and its Government. I hope that this evening—or in the small hours of the morning—we can all walk through the Lobby together.

We are inclined to support new clause 64. We are critical of it, as it enshrines a UK framework, whereas, as a Welsh party, we naturally want frameworks that are tailored to our needs, drawn up by us along with others. The new clause also posits the interesting but undefined notion of an UK internal market, which has been
mentioned several times this evening. That title is snaffled from the EU internal market, which by now is long-established and acts according to explicit negotiated rules that are agreed between the parties of the 28, as the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) said earlier.

**Angus Brendan MacNeil:** The hon. Gentleman is making a good point, and the rhetoric of a UK single market would make sense if the UK was composed of independent states, instead of being one super-state.

**Hywel Williams:** The hon. Gentleman has made that point already, and I agree with it.

In contrast to the EU internal market, the nature of the UK internal market appears to be self-evident and a matter of common sense to many people. It might be great and it might be something that has grown organically and suits us all, but how often have we seen apparently simple, clear and—crucially—unregulated systems descend into a writhing tangle of irreconcilable and conflicting interests? That is what might happen. We might wish for a simple UK internal market, but we might regret it if we wish for it. We will vote for new clause 64 but, if it is passed, we will give close consideration to how it could be improved through further amendments.

Subsidiarity is supposedly one of the governing principles of the European Union. Powers are supposed to be exercised as close to the citizen as possible. That model does not exist in the UK, where the UK Government remain sovereign. We rely on the separation of competences listed in the newly enshrined reserved powers model in the recently passed Wales Act 2017. This Bill, as it stands, undermines and reverses 20 years of the existence of the National Assembly for Wales.

Professor Rawlings, the professor of public law at University College London, in evidence to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee on 31 October, highlighted the concern over what he describes as the double-hatted nature of the UK Government, meaning that they simultaneously represent the UK-wide Government and the Government of England. I raised that point during my speech on our first day in Committee. As I said earlier, this raises a concern not only about conflicts of interest, but about the fact that the subcultures, networks and assumptions of large Departments, including the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, are focused, almost unconsciously, on England. That has been a recurring theme throughout Select Committee evidence sessions. As I said with reference to the Department of Health, this is a long-standing difficulty.

In evidence to the Brexit Committee on 17 October, Laura Dunlop, QC said:

“In our prototype framework—whatever our internal market is destined to look like—at the moment, there is one party in the discussions that is wearing two hats, and that is the UK Government, who are also required to speak for England. That is a significant difficulty, in my view.”

The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West and I were there to hear Laura Dunlop say that. On 24 October, Dr Viviane Gravey told the Welsh Affairs Committee:

“What I mean by giving greater powers is that during that period planned in the Withdrawal Bill, UK Ministers will be able to change the law that has been given back from Brussels, but the devolved Governments “will not. There is then a question of whether any changes made will be in the interests of the whole of the UK or just of England.”

That is the question.

The United Kingdom consists of four countries—four political bodies—not just one. Democracy requires and values all voices, not just one. Devolution demands that all countries within the United Kingdom have a say in the future, not just one. Members will have the opportunity today to stop this Westminster power grab. If all the Opposition parties turn up to vote, and vote together in the interests of the devolved countries, we can stop this encroachment on Welsh sovereignty and put all four UK countries on an equal footing.

**Mr David Jones:** It is a great pleasure to be asked to address the Committee as a lonely Welsh voice in this Scottish enclave south of the Gangway. I should like to say how impressed I am with my new Scottish colleagues, and with the way in which they stand up for their constituencies and for Scotland.

It was always predictable that clause 11 would be one of the more contentious clauses in the Bill, given that it impinges on the devolution settlements that have been created over the past 20 or so years. When we consider what the clause seeks to achieve, it is important to consider the history of devolution in this country. In the case of Scotland and Wales, it was implemented as a consequence of the two referendums that were held in 1997. That was some years after the United Kingdom became a member of what was then the European Economic Community. Indeed, all our devolution legislation was put in place after we joined. It is important to remember that, at the time of accession to the European Union, devolution was not contemplated.

It was in the context of our membership of the European Union that the various devolution settlements were crafted. The powers that were conferred on the new devolved bodies are consequently subject to overriding EU law, regulations and common frameworks, the principal purpose of which was to protect and preserve the integrity of the European single market, as we have heard repeatedly today. It is a fact, however, that as a consequence of the protection of the European single market, those reservations have operated to protect what I am quite happy to call the UK internal market—

**Chris Law** (Dundee West) (SNP): There is no such thing.

**Mr Jones:** I hear the hon. Gentleman saying from a sedentary position that there is no such thing. The fact is that there is such a thing, and furthermore, after we leave the European Union, the existence of such an internal market will become ever clearer.

**Pete Wishart:** Does the right hon. Gentleman think that France has a French internal market and that Germany has a German internal market, or are they just national economies? Does Perthshire have a Perthshire internal market?

**Mr Jones:** I have never been to Perthshire but I am sure that it is a delightful place. In this country, we have four countries and three devolved bodies, which have competence in the area of economic development, among other things. The hon. Gentleman and I might be at
odds on this, but I take the view that there is a United Kingdom internal market. He can come to the contrary conclusion if he wishes.

Hywel Williams: I am intrigued. Can the right hon. Gentleman identify anyone who has spoken in the House today who has argued against having a UK internal market?

9 pm

Mr Jones: No, but I can identify several people who have denied its existence. Clause 11 seeks to ensure that the integrity of the internal market is not compromised, by preserving the restrictions that prevail in respect of EU law.

It is quite clear that the proposals in clause 11 have caused immoderate anger in certain quarters. The SNP Scottish First Minister and the Labour Welsh First Minister actually joined forces to describe what is proposed as a “naked power grab”, a phrase which has been repeated again and again during this debate, but the fact is that it is nothing of the kind. The competences that are the subject of the retention proposed by clause 11 have never been exercised by the devolved authorities since devolution was first implemented. In practical terms, not one iota less power will be exercised in Belfast, Cardiff or Edinburgh than in the current state of affairs. If there is a diminution in power, it is very much theoretical.

Since the devolved bodies first condemned the proposals in the summer, it is fair to say that their position has moderated considerably. However, I find it intriguing that that position does not appear to have moderated in this House. Indeed, certain Opposition representatives seem to be at odds with their own parties in the devolved areas. Preserving the UK internal market is, after all, extremely important to every constituent part of the United Kingdom. Some 63% of Scottish exports go to the rest of the UK. For Northern Ireland, the equivalent figure is 60%. In Wales, it is a bit less at 49.2%, but I suggest that that is due to the distorting effect of Airbus exports, which form a disproportionately large element of the Welsh economy. Whichever way one looks at it, it is therefore important to guard against any policy divergence that might imperil or damage the internal market. It is also important to ensure that the UK Government have the power to conclude trade agreements with third countries post-Brexit, free from concern that the devolved authorities may be legislating in a manner contrary to the obligations contained in such agreements.

We have heard this evening that the provisions of clause 11 affect approximately 111 devolved competences in Scotland, 64 in Wales and an estimated 149 in Northern Ireland. Many of them exist in the fields of agriculture, the environment and fisheries, where it is generally agreed, not least by those who would be closely affected by market distortion, that it is necessary to preserve common frameworks. As my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) pointed out, we need to look at the individuals who are most likely to be affected by policy divergence. For example, NFU Cymru—the Welsh branch of the National Farmers Union—supports the retention of common frameworks so that the price commanded by Welsh lamb, which is certainly the highest-quality lamb in the United Kingdom, is not adversely affected by differing husbandry practices in other parts of the UK.

The UK Government have always made it clear that the retention of competence effected by clause 11 is intended to be only temporary. Decisions on where competences may lie in the long term will be taken at a later date. I fully agree that that should not take too long, and a Minister should indicate from the Front Bench what sort of timescale they anticipate the Government will adopt when deciding and agreeing with the devolved Administrations on where those competences should lie.

Dr Whitford: That is the problem. There is no timescale. This place is snarled up in dealing with Brexit work, and that pressure will be even greater after Brexit. Those of us from the devolved countries feel that the needs of our farmers and fishermen will be way down the agenda for the devolution work being done here.

Mr Jones: I remind the hon. Lady that I am also from one of the devolved countries, so I understand her point and I understand that a timescale is needed. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Brexit has always made it clear that the devolved authorities will ultimately have considerably enhanced powers after this process is complete.

Mr Nigel Smith has been extensively quoted in this debate, and what he has to say is of some significance. He was the chairman of Scotland Forward, the campaign for a yes vote in the 1997 Scottish referendum, and he makes a businesslike and practical statement of the position:

“simply giving into demands from the devolved administrations for a complete takeover of powers would quickly fragment policy coherence threatening the function of the UK single market and even over time the political integrity of these islands.”

That would probably be quite welcome to certain Opposition Members. Nigel Smith continues:

“It would be necessary to establish where coherence was vital and where policy could be devolved or shared. There are also financial considerations in some areas. Temporarily retaining the powers in Westminster through clause 11 while this is assessed and negotiated seems nothing more than procedural common sense. As a long-standing devolutionist, I support the process on this basis.”

He is entirely right. It is common sense. We need to assess where powers properly lie, but that process should not take too long.

I am heartened that, at the Joint Ministerial Committee in October, the various Administrations agreed to work towards the establishment of the necessary frameworks. Contrary to what the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) indicated, it is not a question of the United Kingdom Government imposing where those powers lie; it is a question of agreement. The communiqué that followed the meeting said:

“There will also be close working between the UK Government and the devolved administrations on reserved and excepted matters that impact significantly on devolved responsibilities.

Discussions will be either multilateral or bilateral between the UK Government and the devolved administrations. It will be the aim of all parties to agree where there is a need for common frameworks and the content of them.

The outcomes from these discussions on common frameworks will be without prejudice to the UK’s negotiations and future relationship with the EU.”
It seems to me that the United Kingdom Government and the devolved Administrations are moving positively towards agreement on where those competences should lie, but I stress that the process should be pursued as expeditiously as possible. I have a huge amount of sympathy for those on both sides of the House who have indicated that there is currently a degree of uncertainty. The best way of resolving that uncertainty is by working quickly and co-operatively with the devolved Administrations.

I therefore believe clause 11 should be supported by the House. I endorse once again what Nigel Smith, a practical devolutionist, has to say about the matter. I also believe those who are promoting the various amendments, most of which appear to be aimed at ensuring the powers that are repatriated pass straight to the devolved Administrations, should think again. Without a coherent agreement beforehand, there could be chaos in this country, which is frankly the last thing we want.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) made some important points about the wider issue of devolution. We need to revisit the various institutions that operate the devolution settlements in this country. It is fairly clear that the JMC process is not working. It has been honoured by Governments of all stripes more in the breach than in the observance. Indeed, I believe that during the last Labour Government several years passed without a meeting of the JMC. This cannot be right. It is important that the United Kingdom Government and the devolved Administrations should have regular dialogue, one with another. I am not persuaded that that needs to be put on a statutory basis, but it needs to be something more than a chore for the various Administrations. It is important that a dialogue be constantly maintained. We are moving into a new era in this country, a post-Brexit one, and it is important that all Administrations within the UK understand that they all have a duty, one to another, to work positively to ensure the prosperity of this country and its citizens. At the moment, that is not happening and this needs to be revised and reviewed. I do not believe this Bill is the proper vehicle for such changes, but once this process is under way, we are going to need to look at those institutions again carefully. We need to move into that new era.

Several hon. Members rose—

The Temporary Chair (Sir David Amess): Order. Before I call the next speaker, I remind the Committee that the debate finishes at 18 minutes past midnight. Many Members are waiting to speak and I want to give the debate and the scrutiny committee time to respond to the debate. So unless colleagues keep the speeches to about 10 minutes, there will be any number of disappointed Members.

Joanna Cherry: I rise to support the amendments standing in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), and those that have been drafted by the Scottish and Welsh Governments, which have cross-party support from the SNP, the Labour party, Plaid Cymru and the Liberal Democrats.

I want to dispel a myth emanating from Conservative Members before I look at clause 11 in any detail: the idea that there is some sort of division between the position of my Scottish Government colleagues and the SNP. I can assure those Members that that is not the case and we regularly meet the Scottish Government Brexit Minister, Mike Russell. Let me tell Conservative Members what Mr Russell told a number of Sunday newspapers yesterday. He said that these cross-party devolution amendments are “non-negotiable” and that, if the UK Government want the SNP to recommend support for the Bill in the Scottish Parliament, they must be passed. He continued:

“I don’t want to leave anybody in any doubt, if the Bill cannot be amended—”

as per these amendments—

“there cannot be a legislative consent motion, there cannot be the progress that the government wants.”

So let there be no doubt of the SNP position on this, which is the position of the Scottish Government and of the Welsh Government, and which has the support of the Lib Dems, Plaid Cymru and the Labour party in this Chamber.

It is important to focus on clause 11. We have heard a lot of general rhetoric today, but what we are actually looking at is that clause. I am not going to use my own analysis of it. I am going to use the analysis of much more eminent lawyers than myself. Let me start by briefly declaring an interest, as I am going to quote the views of the Faculty of Advocates in Scotland on the Bill and I am a member of the faculty, although I am no longer practising. It has pointed out that 111 areas were listed as potentially requiring a common policy framework and that the list is too long, its content is too broadly drawn and some of the 111 areas were so imprecise “as to be incapable of meaningful understanding”.

It said that the proposed approach of this Government to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill “threatens to encroach on matters that are already devolved and legislated on by Holyrood under the current settlement.”

That is the view of the Scottish Bar, of which I am a member; I wish I could say they were all members of the SNP, but they are not, as they comprise people from all political persuasions and none.

The hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) referred to the evidence given to the Brexit Select Committee by Laura Dunlop, QC, who is the faculty’s spokesperson and head of its law reform committee. The Bingham Centre for the Rule of Law has convened a group of experts to look at the Bill, under the chairmanship of the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), who was in his place earlier. It, too, has been extremely critical of clause 11:

“In a constitution where legislative power is divided between the national parliament and devolved parliaments, uncertainty about the division of legislative power undermines foreseeability and predictability about the overall legal framework and is therefore inimical to the Rule of Law.”

Clause 11 of the Bill is such a law: it re-defines the scope of devolved legislative competence after Brexit.”

Those are the words of a group of expert lawyers convened by the Bingham Centre for the Rule of Law. It is not an SNP partisan view, but the view of a cross-party group of lawyers.

9.15 pm

Today’s proceedings are being watched closely both north and south of the border. I noticed that, about an hour or so ago, in response to some of the speeches from Government Members, Professor Aileen McHarg, the professor of public law at the University of Strathclyde and a renowned expert in this area who has given evidence to Parliament, said:
“It just doesn’t wash to suggest... that criticism of clause 11 is just SNP grievance mongering. I’ve not heard anyone with any expertise on devolution who thinks it is acceptable.”

These are views that are widely held.

In putting forward these cross-party amendments, what we are engaged in is protecting the devolved settlements that, speaking particularly from a Scottish point of view, are the settled will of the Scottish people and have widespread support. Eighty per cent. of people in Scotland support the current set-up of the Scottish Parliament.

I think a brief history lesson may be in order for some Government Members. It is simply not correct to say that the Conservative and Unionist party is the party that has delivered the most power to the Scottish Parliament. The most powers that were ever delivered to the Scottish Parliament were delivered by the Scotland Act 1998, which had cross-party support in this House, but was opposed by the Scottish Conservatives. The Conservative and Unionist party has been somewhat late to the party in its acceptance of devolution. Just as the Lord always welcomes a sinner back to the fold, we are very glad to have them on board, but we will not take any instruction from them on how to protect the devolved settlement.

We are not in danger of taking instruction from Scottish Conservative Members because, as other hon. Members have pointed out, despite the fact that they have so many reservations about clause 11, as they keep telling us this afternoon and this evening, they have not bothered to put forward any constructive amendments themselves. They are falling into a classic trap. They are relying on the process of the negotiations, under the auspices of the JMC. Progress has been made there, as we say quite openly, but we are here today to debate the legal framework. We are here to look at clause 11.

It is not just my view, the view of the SNP and the view of the Labour party, Plaid Cymru and the Lib Dems that the clause is unacceptable; it is the view of lawyers of all hues. Remember the words of Professor Aileen McHarg: she could not think of a single person with “any expertise on devolution” who thinks that clause 11 is “acceptable”. Professor Michael Keating, the director of the Centre on Constitutional Change, has described clause 11 and the Bill as “the first significant rolling back of devolution since the process started twenty years ago.”

So let us not have any more of this nonsense about this being an SNP grievance. It is a widely held view that clause 11, in its current form, is not acceptable.

Pete Wishart: My hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right. The Scottish Affairs Committee has not heard one dissenting voice to the fact that clause 11 is thoroughly bad for devolution. It is not just all the constitutionalists and all the legal experts who agree with that; the Conservatives agree with it too. They do not believe that clause 11 is fit for purpose. What can she do to encourage them to join us this evening to ensure that we make progress and change the clause significantly?

Joanna Cherry: I am encouraging those Conservatives to listen to the experts who have given evidence to the various House of Commons Committees, whether orally or in writing. I have mentioned several of them. May I mention what Dr Jo Hunt, from the University of Cardiff, said to the Exiting the European Union Committee? She said:

“This should be a profound constitutional moment, where the nature of the UK is properly addressed, and a debate and discussion is had about what the United Kingdom is for and what the roles of the various parties in the United Kingdom are. We have had any number of Select Committee reports from the Commons and the House of Lords dealing with interinstitutional relations, intergovernmental relations, and devolution.”

Now is the moment, when we are allegedly taking back control, to look carefully at how we distribute those powers within the nations of the United Kingdom. We should not simply bring them back in one box from Brussels, rest them at London and leave it to London to decide when and if Edinburgh and Cardiff ever get sight of that power.

There is a terrible irony here. Many Brexiteers went on at great length about how Brussels imposes its will on the United Kingdom, but that is actually a fundamental misunderstanding of how the European Union works. As has been explained, it works by a number of sovereign nations pooling their sovereignty and participating in a process of decisions. If anyone on the Conservative Benches really is a Brexiteer who believes in taking back control and does not like the way, in their opinion, Brussels has imposed on the UK, surely that should make them even more motivated to ensure that the centre—Westminster—does not impose on the constituent nations of the UK.

Luke Graham: We have all raised concerns about clause 11, and we are trying to constructively address them. The hon. and learned Lady makes her position about devolution clear, but she also talks about a chance to refresh the whole constitutional settlement for the United Kingdom. Will she work constructively with Members on the Government Benches to address issues such as air quality, which is devolved? It would be better if we had a joined-up UK approach and if that were reserved with climate issues and other such issues, so that we look effectively to get the best outcome for our constituents and not just go on to political dogma.

Joanna Cherry: The Scottish National party has always worked constructively with all parties to ensure that the principle of subsidiarity is respected within these islands. However, what we are not in the business of doing is simply lying supine while all these powers are brought back from Brussels and left here at Westminster, with absolutely no time limit—[Interruption.] The hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) may not like it, but this is the weight of the evidence that we have heard about the effect of clause 11. It is not my view; it is the view of many others.

Several hon. Members rose—

Joanna Cherry: I will continue my point.

We are told that it is imperative for everything to be imposed on Scotland, Wales and indeed Northern Ireland from the top down, because we have a UK single market.

Stephen Kerr: Will the hon. and learned Lady give way?

Joanna Cherry: No, we have heard a lot from the hon. Gentleman. I only have a little time left, and I want to develop my point about the single market, because it is very important. I am indebted to the Scottish...
blogger and writer Paul Kavanagh—better known on these Benches as the Wee Ginger Dug—for my thoughts on this matter. He has pointed out that there is no such thing as a UK single market. At the moment, the United Kingdom is a unitary state, and what exists in the UK is the internal market of a unitary state. A single market refers to the situation where there are several distinct and discrete national entities coming together from the bottom up in a mutually agreed and negotiated regulatory framework. That is what the EU is at present. It is not what we have in the United Kingdom at present. Indeed, after Brexit, if this Bill goes through unamended, the unitary state of the United Kingdom will be even more centralised than it is at present.

At the moment, the EU states decide collectively what regulations they want to govern the EU single market. On the basis of the Bill as currently drafted, what will happen is that Ministers of the Crown—by the way, that does not include Scottish Ministers; the definition just talks about Cabinet Ministers—will decide on these frameworks, and they will be imposed on us.

I am conscious of what you said, Sir David, so I will bring my remarks to a close, but I will give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): On the definition of what constitutes a single market and a unitary market, my interpretation is that any marketplace’s singularity is simply defined by the friction in the trade and the commerce carried out within it. By definition, it is not really something that we can simply sign up to or leave. It is about the extent to which there is a commonality of regulatory and trading arrangements, and cultural and institutional relationships. Therefore, this definition does not really hold water in that respect.

Joanna Cherry: The distinction I am drawing is between a single market and a unitary market. I am saying that the European Union is a single market because it is a collection of sovereign states that come together and participate in making common regulations. The United Kingdom, as framed by this withdrawal Bill, will not be such a single market. It will be a unitary market. The regulations and the frameworks are imposed from the top down. That is the distinction that I seek to make.

Stephen Kerr: Will the hon. and learned Lady give way?

Joanna Cherry: As I said, I am drawing my comments to a close.

I want to address one of the many points we have heard from the Government Benches. I think it was the hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson) who said that he is upset and disappointed that the issue of independence is still on the table. Well, I will tell him why it is still on the table; today gives it a good example. The majority of people at the last Scottish election voted for Members of the Scottish Parliament who want another independence referendum—it is called democracy—and the Scottish Parliament itself has voted that there should be another independence referendum if it is necessary because of the Brexit process. But the reason why so many of us in Scotland are interested in the notion of independence really arises from the current crisis in which the United Kingdom finds itself. I will finish by quoting the First Minister of Scotland, who today said:

“Right now, Ireland is powerfully demonstrating the importance of being independent when it comes to defending your vital national interests.”

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): This debate concerns all constituent countries of the United Kingdom, but I will reserve my remarks to Scotland as I represent West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine.

As a Member of Parliament of the 2017 vintage, which is a very fine vintage, I am finding—along with everyone else, I am sure—that one of the most common questions asked of me on the doorsteps and in constituency surgeries is, “How did you vote in the referendum on membership of the European Union?” On such occasions, I deploy one of two answers. I either say, “I’m terribly sorry that I did vote to remain, but I promise you that the United Kingdom is leaving the European Union, and we will make a success of it.”, or I answer, “Yes, I know. Like you, I voted to remain, so I’m sorry, but the fact is that we are leaving the European Union. And, you know what? I think we will make a success of it.” That is very easy. Being a Scottish Member of Parliament, another regular inquiry is whether I believe that powers returned from Brussels should be directly transferred to Holyrood. It is not a simple question. [Interruption.] No, it is not, and it requires more than a simple answer. Unfortunately, that is hard to get across on the doorstep, or even in this Chamber.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Let me make it simple for the hon. Gentleman. The founding principle of the devolution settlement is that things that are not reserved are automatically devolved. Is it or is it not his belief that clause 11 fundamentally undermines that principle?

Andrew Bowie: Like my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton), I believe that changes will have to be made to clause 11 as it stands, but that we cannot support the amendments tabled by the SNP as they would fatally undermine the United Kingdom and the common market that we all share.

Let us look at the facts of the devolution settlements. The current devolution settlements reflect the UK’s membership of the European Union. They provide that devolved institutions cannot act or legislate incompatibly with EU law. This has meant that, while we have been within the EU, we have had overarching laws and frameworks across the UK, which has meant that businesses in the UK can trade with one another knowing that they share agreed standards and that we have agreed approaches on how to manage our shared resources. Ultimately, it has meant that Britain can enter into international agreements knowing that our whole country can meet our obligations. That is vital. It is complex and hard to explain to people when we are out knocking on doors, but it is vital that we try. The future of our internal market, which exists and of our United Kingdom depends on our making a success of Brexit, and that means making a success of devolution and the settlement for our nations and regions.

Ian Murray: The hon. Gentleman is talking a lot about being on the doorsteps in his constituency. When his constituents ask him whether he thinks clause 11 is deficient and whether he would like it fixed, does he explain how it is deficient and how he would like it fixed?

Andrew Bowie: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question. I have to admit I have never been asked specifically on the doorstep how I think clause 11 is
deficient, but when I am I will explain the issue to people, and if the hon. Gentleman holds on, I will get to that in my speech.

Let us be clear: this is not a power grab. It is part of a process through which we must work to achieve the best possible settlement to ensure continuity for business, the integrity of our internal market, and the future success of our United Kingdom. We must, and we will, make a success of this process.

3.30 pm

Pete Wishart: Is the hon. Gentleman actually saying that if, for whatever reason, clause 11 was not passed or was significantly amended, what he refers to as the UK’s single market would be done away with?

Andrew Bowie: I am not sure I actually understand the premise of the question. I will give way again if the hon. Gentleman would like to explain.

Pete Wishart: It is quite straightforward. The hon. Gentleman is alleging and suggesting that, for some reason, if clause 11 were significantly amended, his internal market would be at risk. Does he actually believe for one minute that, if clause 11 were rejected, his internal market would absolutely disappear?

Andrew Bowie: I am arguing that, if we agreed to the provisions set down by the Scottish National party and the other Opposition parties, it would be fatally undermined and at risk.

Just to prove my point, we all know that making a success of Brexit and protecting and strengthening our internal market are not in the interests of the Scottish National party, whose raison d’être remains the destruction of our United Kingdom. Conservative Members are committed to making these things work and to making a success of this exciting new chapter in our island’s story for business and for peoples from Inverbervie to Ipswich, and from Banchory to Bognor.

That is why the UK Government are working tirelessly with the devolved Administrations in Cardiff and Edinburgh, and with the various parties in Northern Ireland, to make sure that when we leave the European Union in 2019, the laws that protect the integrity of our market, and the common frameworks that ensure parity and access across Britain, remain the same as they are today. That will involve compromise, but surely even the greatest hardliner would agree that it makes no sense for each of the four nations of our United Kingdom to have different rules and regulations or different regulatory bodies for packaging, animal welfare or aircraft noise, for example.

If we get this right, little will change for most people and most businesses. For the fisherman, it will still be Marine Scotland responsible for implementing rules and regulations on the quayside. For the farmer, it will still be the Scottish Government making a mess of these regulations, rather than the powers themselves.

As things stand today, it is a fact that, thanks to the actions of this Government, the Scottish Parliament is now one of the most powerful devolved legislative Assemblies in the world, with powers over—[Interruptions.] It has powers over justice, education, health, transport, the environment and, now, taxation and elements of social security. The jury is still out on whether that is a good thing, but that may be to do with the parties that have been in charge of those regulations, rather than the powers themselves.

Far from Lord Robertson’s claim that devolution would kill nationalism stone dead, we are about to enter our 11th year of nationalist Government in Scotland, so I remain worried for our Union. For me and the people of the north-east of Scotland, which I have the huge privilege to represent, I am afraid that, far from the renewing or revitalising experience promised by the architects of devolution in 1999, the reality of devolution has been cuts, tax rises, a failing education system and the perception of a central-belt bias in all decision making.

However, just because devolution in its current form has not worked for my constituency or my constituents, that does not mean that it cannot. The point is that, as we today debate new powers that might be going to the Scottish Parliament, it is high time that the current Administration in Holyrood looked at their record in managing the powers they already have and the effect that has wrought on the north-east.

This afternoon and this evening, we have heard a lot from the SNP about power grabs, a betrayal of the Scottish people, Scotland being dragged out of the EU against its will and how we are undermining the devolution settlements, when, of course, nothing could be further from the truth. We all know that concessions are going to be made on both sides of the Committee on this argument. We all know that the Scottish Parliament will have sweeping powers under common UK frameworks on a whole raft of areas.

I will support clause 11, and I will vote against the Opposition provisions. As my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire said earlier, amendments to clause 11 will be required: we do require a legislative consent motion if we want the other place to pass the Bill. I think that all sides appreciate that. That is why we expect movement on the issue this month at the JMC.

However, this is a process. The Opposition amendments would undermine our United Kingdom and threaten our common market. That is why I cannot support them.

Neil Gray: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in one of the most important constitutional debates impacting on Scotland since the re-establishment of the Scottish Parliament. The whole basis and foundation of how Scotland is governed is being discussed today. We should not underestimate how important that is; we cannot allow today to be politicked away or the issues to be kicked down the road. We must consider what is before us carefully and in a non-partisan way. Cross-party working has already started in the tabling of amendments, which have been drafted jointly by the Labour Welsh Government and the Scottish National party Government.
Anyone who understands politics in Scotland will appreciate that Labour and the SNP do not often agree on constitutional issues; that is not a flippant point, but a serious one, on which Ministers might reflect. I fully support amendments 72, 164, 165 and 183 to 188, in the names of my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), my hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) and the hon. Members for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) and the hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) and the hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) highlighted that clause 11 impinges on the devolved settlements. That is where my concern lies with the so-called UK frameworks.

I understand that it would be sensible in some areas for there to be agreed principles across these isles—I think that of a future independent Scotland’s relationship with the rest of the UK, so why would I not think it now?—but for intra-national frameworks to be strong, effective and deliverable, they need to be agreed on the basis of mutual partnership, without a dominant and dictatorial director.

Stephen Kerr: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Neil Gray: To be fair, the hon. Gentleman has had a good say this evening.

I am not the only one concerned about the direction of travel that the UK Government appear to think we are taking. NFU Scotland has, as I am sure Ministers will be aware, a series of red lines regarding Brexit, many of which are pertinent to today’s debate. I will pick a few out: it wants a replacement for the common agricultural policy that will support the industry in the medium to long term; agriculture must continue to receive the same level and proportion of funding as it does now in the post-2022 landscape; and crucially for tonight, although the Treasury should finance the new policy on a UK-wide funding basis, NFU Scotland says that “Any approach that adopts a ‘Defra-centric’, one-size-fits-all policy on to the devolved nations would not be acceptable.”

That is why it is crucial that powers in devolved areas are returned to the devolved nations, not held centrally. To do anything other than devolve and then seek to agree a framework agreement in devolved areas would undermine devolution. It would set a dangerous precedent if the UK Government set the terms of devolved policy and then left it to the devolved nations to fill in at the margins. That point was reiterated by Professor Michael Keating when he said the Tory plan would create a “hierarchical model of devolution” where “the broad principles are set in London and the details filled in across the nations.”

That is not devolution, but executive management. It is anti-devolution, and would rip up the terms and principles of the Scotland Act 1998.

Brexit already poses potentially huge challenges for Scotland economically and constitutionally. Keeping the Bill as it stands in this area would not just be a hard Brexit—it would be a constitutionally regressive Brexit. At this stage, it is worth returning to NFU Scotland’s Brexit priorities: that Scottish and UK agricultural and food products must have frictionless access to existing and new export markets, and that the domestic market must not be exposed to cheaper imports that lack Scotland’s exemplary animal welfare and environmental standards. Continued access to a skilled and competent workforce, within both the farming and food processing sectors, must be secured as a priority. Continued, targeted farm support will be vital, not least through an unknown transition period. This support must be refocused on action-based measures to bring about improved productivity across sectors while delivering environmental benefits and safeguarding and enhancing product standards—the bedrock of a thriving farming, food and drink sector for the post-Brexit era.

I am not closed to the idea that there may be opportunities from Brexit should the UK Government listen and act in a way that is inclusive and bipartisan, but that has not happened to date, no matter what Ministers try to say. The Scottish Government’s compromise proposals have been dismissed and ignored, and that is why we are at today’s crucial juncture. [Interjection.] Conservative Members, some of whom represent farming constituencies, ought to listen to this. NFU Scotland shares the Scottish Government’s desire for continued membership of both the single market and the customs union. Perhaps now the UK Government will realise that they need to allow for tailored arrangements to allow varying national priorities across these isles to be reflected.

How topical it is that we should be discussing aspects of devolution relating to Brexit as we learn, this very day, of what the UK Government appear to be willing to concede in their negotiations with the EU regarding Northern Ireland. In essence, they are conceding that the compromise plan that was presented by the Scottish Government last year for a bespoke deal for Scotland in retaining single market and customs union membership—a plan dismissed as impossible—was on the table earlier for Northern Ireland and has now been discussed. There will be no hard border on the island of Ireland, in summation. It appears that the DUP has put the brakes on that—the irony is there for all to see. What a precedent that sets.

It is time that the UK Government acknowledged that Scotland, as well as Northern Ireland, has the right to expect a bespoke Brexit deal, and that there is nothing precluding a deal that protects Scotland’s interests, as we have been arguing all along. Clearly, for Scotland, that means the ability, for example, to have a different immigration system, and continued membership of the single market and the customs union. Sadly, though, that does not appear to be the path the UK Government are willing to follow, regardless of the consequences either for Scotland or for the future of the United Kingdom. Why not? I fully understand why Northern Ireland needs a bespoke deal. I have no issues with the UK Government pursuing that—in fact, I congratulate them on it—but why do Scotland’s needs matter less? To deny Scotland the same opportunity as Northern Ireland is being afforded would be ridiculous and indefensible. To take back powers from the EU that are clearly devolved competencies and have them sitting here at Westminster for some future divvying-up shows a lack of political or critical thinking, shows a lack of trust or respect towards the devolved nations, and is—quite frankly—lazy. To refuse
to look at fresh areas of devolution like employment law to help Scotland deal with Brexit in the most flexible way is equally untrusting, disrespectful, and lazy.

The UK Government must understand the concerns that are being raised. They must not want to rip apart and fundamentally undermine the devolved settlement. Surely they must be willing to engage and accept amendments so as to make Brexit, if not politically palatable, at least reasonable for the devolved nations. I hope that all Members representing Scottish constituencies will support the amendments to be voted on later tonight.

Stephen Kerr: I will—[Interruption.] Yes, I am going to speak. I know that SNP Members will be very pleased about that. I will keep my remarks short because a number of people want to speak, but I want to respond to the idea that has been traded pretty commonly in the past couple of speeches about the imposition of a devolution settlement vis-à-vis the frameworks. The Scottish Affairs Committee report quotes the Secretary of State for Scotland, who said:

“A UK framework is not a framework that the UK Government imposes; it is a framework that is agreed across the United Kingdom.”

I believe that that is a definitive expression of the Government's policy in relation to the nature of frameworks and how they will be achieved.

Every time we have a debate in this House in which devolved powers and Brexit are mentioned, the Scottish nationalists go crazy—[Interruption.] Yes, berserk; that is a good word. A number of contributors, including the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), have spoken positively about how we can work together to create common ground and lift the issue from the trenches of political warfare in which, too often, the SNP wish to put it.

9.45 pm

It is well established—I do not think there can be any doubt about this—that the Scottish nationalists are world class when it comes to grievance manufacturing. It is time to get past all that, because these issues are of such importance to the people of our country, whether they are consumers or producers and from whatever walk of life they come. Instead of sloganising and weaponising, and using phrases such as “power grab”, which has become commonplace today—[Interruption.] Bingo, as I think someone said earlier. We need, instead, an adult approach.

As I said earlier in an intervention, I genuinely compliment the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart). Aside from the usual entertainment that he throws into his speeches, I felt that there was real substance and positivity in what he said. I remind the Committee that these powers that mean so much to the Scottish nationalists are the same powers that the SNP wants to give back to Brussels in the unlikely event that there is such a thing as an independent Scotland.

Jan Murray: The hon. Gentleman is one of the 12 new Scottish Conservative MPs. Many of his colleagues have already said that clause 11 is deficient, and they would like it to be amended. Will he tell us whether he thinks it is deficient, and how he would like it amended?

Stephen Kerr: I will come on to that point, if the hon. Gentleman will let me make some progress through my speech.

I remind the Committee that despite what we heard to the contrary, the Conservative Government delivered additional powers to the Scottish Parliament in 2015 and 2016 in fulfilment of their vow, making it the most powerful devolved Parliament in the world. That was a Conservative promise made and kept. The SNP wants to create a crisis, and I hope that we in the Conservatives will continue to be reasonable in our approach to the issue.

Andrew Bowie: Does my hon. Friend agree that SNP Members have absolutely no interest in our making a success of Brexit, because their only aim is to break up our United Kingdom?

Stephen Kerr: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I was about to say that the SNP is like a collection of 35 carbon copies of the famous Rikki Fulton creation, the Rev. I. M. Jolly. SNP Members sit there on the Benches, depressing the nation and bringing their grim worldview to the people of Scotland. Being so cheerful keeps them going. They talk themselves and Scotland down, and they imply that our Scottish entrepreneurs, our businesses and our communities will be unable to cope with any change and unable to take advantage of the opportunities that the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts mentioned and that will undoubtedly arise as we leave the European Union.

Chris Law: The Fraser of Allander Institute predicts that not 80,000, but 139,000 jobs are at stake. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that is not talking Scotland down; those are the facts of the matter when it comes to Brexit? We are just about at a cliff edge now.

Stephen Kerr: I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing the Fraser of Allander Institute to the attention of the Committee, because the institute also points out that the perpetual threat of a second independence referendum is having a dragging effect on the Scottish economy.

Mr Sweeney: The hon. Gentleman referred earlier to the Scottish Parliament being the most powerful Parliament in the world, and I am aware that he opposed its initial creation but now recognises its benefits. The creation of the Scottish Parliament has resulted in regulatory divergence between parts of the United Kingdom. Does that fact not undermine the whole logical position of the Tories’ argument against our amendments? Surely, it has already been established that divergence exists but there is still a viable single market in the UK.

Stephen Kerr: In my opinion, divergence brought about by devolution enriches the fabric of the Union, but the divergence we are talking about could, in a very real sense, undermine the integrity of the United Kingdom’s common market.

I have had emails from constituents that regularly begin with the words: “I believe that Brexit should strengthen devolution for Scotland, not weaken it.” Many other Members will have had similar emails. I want my constituents to know that that is exactly my position. I want a Brexit that strengthens the democracy of our country and strengthens the devolution settlement for Scotland. I ask Ministers, in the summing up at
some point tonight, to make it clear again that the Bill guarantees the existing devolution settlement and the existing powers of the Scottish Parliament and promises that there will be more powers to come.

In regard to the tone and manner in which this issue is discussed and debated, I wish to pay tribute—SNP Members will not be surprised to hear me say this—to Ruth Davidson, Professor Adam Tomkins and others, who have worked as honest brokers in this process, by working with the Scottish and UK Governments to bring them together to build consensus. I believe consensus is vital for the new constitutional settlement we need to reach.

I welcome the recent change of tone from the Scottish Government, especially from the First Minister. When she came out of Downing Street on her last visit to London, I thought she had some very positive things to say. As a Scot, I welcome that: I welcome the fact that the First Minister of my country is willing to be a positive contributor, rather than a simply a detractor.

I want take this opportunity to express my full confidence in the approach and style of the First Secretary of State and the Secretary of State for Scotland, who are leading the UK Government in the very important talks with the Scottish Government. I have great confidence that there will come out of the discussions an agreement that will be sustainable because it will be built on consensus. Consensus is not gained by shouting matches or feigned indignation—we see quite a lot of feigned indignation in this place—and all I would say is thank goodness the SNP leadership in Edinburgh has more maturity than some of the MPs it sends to London. I remain hopeful, and I am optimistic.

Ian Murray: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen Kerr: I was just about to deal with the hon. Gentleman’s previous intervention, but I will sit down.

Ian Murray: I was about to ask the hon. Gentleman when he was going to talk about the deficiencies in clause 11 and what he would do to sort them out.

Stephen Kerr: I will say this much: it is not that I do not understand people’s concerns about clause 11, because I share some of those concerns. As the intergovernmental discussions progress and the Bill returns to this House, as it will, before it goes to the other place, it is very much my hope that there will be some greater detail in clause 11 to help all hon. Members to have a degree of confidence in its intent.

We are talking about trust, or the lack of trust, and that issue is keeping us from working out a satisfactory agreement. Steps must be taken to underpin the trust that needs to exist on both sides—the UK Government and the devolved Administrations. The UK Government will have to demonstrate trustworthiness in the way that the Bill is amended, as it must be, and the Scottish Government will have to show trustworthiness by committing themselves to the outcome of this process to the extent that they will publicly state their support for the passage of a legislative consent motion in the Scottish Parliament. To me, that is what trust looks like.

Deidre Brock: If the UK Government genuinely wish to show willing towards the Scottish Government and their concerns about the Bill and clause 11 specifically, does the hon. Gentleman not think that powers should be devolved directly to the devolved Administrations first and then that frameworks should be agreed? One wonders what the UK Government are actually afraid of. The hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) spoke about powers being devolved when the UK Government think it is safe to do so. Why is there such concern about not sending those powers to the Scottish Government?

Stephen Kerr: There are, as we have discussed, either 109 or 111 powers. The Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee report lists 111. There is an issue of trust that we need to address to underpin any eventual agreement. The point is that the Bill will need to be amended. Those amendments will need to reflect where the powers will eventually rest, and whether they will go straight to the devolved Administrations, or if some will be subject to mutual agreements—memorandums of understanding—that will create the frameworks to support the functioning of the UK’s internal market. I hope very much that the Government will bring forward some detail to add light with regard to those issues.

Ian Murray: Like many of his colleagues, the hon. Gentleman is therefore admitting that clause 11 is deficient. He is almost but not quite telling us how he might fix it, but even so he is going to vote in favour of it this evening.

Stephen Kerr: Yes, and that is no surprise, because I sit on the Conservative side—the Government side—of the House of Commons. I believe and trust in the Government. I believe that Ministers will deliver on a settlement. I do not know why that is such a surprise to Opposition Members.

Jenny Chapman: The hon. Gentleman has told his Front-Bench colleagues that he will vote with the Government this evening but, should the Bill return unamended in this House, what would be his inclination on Third Reading?

Stephen Kerr: In common with other colleagues who have spoken today, I expect there to be amendments, and when those amendments come to the House in due course, it will be because everyone involved in this process, including the UK Government and the devolved Administrations—the Scottish Government are my immediate interest—will have put on an adult head because there is so much at stake for our country. I happen to think that one of the most positive contributing factors to the change of climate has been the Scottish Affairs Committee’s excellent report, which is a step in the right direction.

Ian Murray: On a point of order, Sir David. I am slightly confused about the process in this Chamber. The hon. Gentleman is making a fine speech, but he keeps talking about amendments that will result in him supporting the Bill. Have you been notified of the Government tabling any amendments to clause 11?

The Temporary Chair (Sir David Amess): That is not a point of order; it is a point of frustration.
Stephen Kerr: Let me press on, because I did say that I would be brief, and I am in danger of not keeping that promise.

I insist on the Government doing what has to be done to ensure that there is no disruption to the UK home market. I want to be clear that when I say the UK, I mean Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland. I do not want a Brexit that weakens the United Kingdom politically or economically. I am a Unionist. I do not want to see the creation of needless barriers that hinder the frictionless function of Scotland’s most important marketplace, namely the rest of the United Kingdom. The process should avoid any unwarranted points of difference that make it more difficult to trade throughout the UK, because that would inevitably affect business, which would inevitably affect jobs.

Common standards will be needed for the common market within the UK, and those standards will need to be set democratically and transparently. Businesses are looking for leadership on these matters as much as they are looking for harmony throughout the UK single market. It is time to step up to the plate in that respect. Frameworks for the operation of the UK single market must be set at a UK level on the basis of agreement across the United Kingdom, including with the devolved Administrations, and it is up to us as politicians to rise to that challenge.

I am not calling for a whole raft of complex arrangements, because I do not think that would help anything, but we do need some jointly agreed common frameworks. I acknowledge and welcome the Scottish Government’s positive approach towards that end. I believe that the two Select Committee reports that were published in the last couple of weeks have been hugely helpful to the aim of bringing about the co-operation and partnering needed between Scotland’s two Governments.

10 pm

This situation highlights something that was mentioned earlier. The conclusions of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee’s report described the UK’s intergovernmental machinery as not really being on a proper footing. It says there is a need for “established mechanisms for both proper consultation and shared decision making between governments.”

If that existed now, I think we would be having a different sort of debate. Similarly, our frameworks and our standards must reflect the prospect of trade deals. The Government will have to ensure that our standards are protected and enhanced by international trade deals. Some arrangements will require primary legislation. Thoughtful consideration of that legislation, through parliamentary scrutiny and public debate, will be vital. Consensus is everything on these matters.

I will come to the conclusion of my brief remarks—[Interruption.] I have given way a number of times and this is supposed to be a debate. Some arrangements will require no more than memorandums of understanding between Governments within the UK to agree mutually agreed conventions. Some if not many of the powers will rightly and properly be devolved from day one, with a consequent diversity that I would not only welcome but celebrate, because that is what makes up this United Kingdom. I believe that if we achieve a consideration of those factors, we will get the consensus we require.

I know that a future Scottish Conservative Government would decentralise power, because that is our Conservative instinct. We will continue to call for decentralisation of power against an agenda from the SNP Government in Edinburgh that seeks only to centralise power in the hands of the few, not the many. I fully expect the Bill to be amended in such a way that it will gain consent from not only the Scottish Parliament, but the other place. In due time and with enough positivity from all sides, we can have the calm consideration of a legislative consent motion in the Scottish Parliament. I hope that we can have confirmation that that will be the case. On that basis, I support the Bill as it stands in Committee, and expect Government amendments to come forward before the Bill goes to the other place.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): Thank you, Dame Rosie. I shall attempt to keep my remarks within the time limit handed down by the Chair, at least 20 minutes ago.

As a member of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, I have been in the privileged position of being able to talk, both formally and informally, with constitutional and political experts about many things, including clause 11. As part of the process of formulating our latest report, the Committee’s Chair, the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin), and I travelled to Edinburgh and took evidence from panels of experts over two days. It was an enlightening and informative experience.

Under clause 11, a potential 111 powers that could be devolved to Scotland will be held at Westminster until such time as the UK Parliament sees fit to devolve them. The UK Government’s stance is, “Trust us; we’ll do the right thing.” And trust them we have over the years: we trusted them to deliver the Calman report but they did not; we trusted them to deliver on the Smith commission but they did not; we looked to the Sewel convention and we saw right through it; and we listened to, and were influenced by, a vow that was not a vow.

In September 2014, the then Prime Minister David Cameron told us that we were a “family of nations”. We were told that Scotland could lead, not that the Government would attempt to put a lead on Scotland, but every amendment requested by SNP MPs, who were democratically elected to represent the citizens of Scotland, was voted down. When we voted to stay in the EU, our views were ignored. When we asked to sit at the table during the negotiations, we were snubbed. I can assure the Minister that the words “the cheque is in the post” and the promise that you will respect me in the morning will not work any more.

I am well aware of the cold, hard fact that the UK Government do not have to do anything, but Scotland is not a faithful hunting dog standing at its master’s heel, waiting on its orders. Scotland in the Union is a concept rooted in the past. The ties that bind us come from, in part, a shared history—a history of conflict and conquest—but the sun set on the empire a long time ago. It might come as a surprise to some, but 59 colonies have walked away from the empire and, as a new dawn rises, so does Scotland. We want a different future from the one set out for us, but Scotland cannot choose its own future when we have to seek permission to do so.
Clause 11 does not set out a timetable for transition. Professors Richard Rawlings and Alan Page have both raised concerns that clause 11 is described as a transition agreement, but that there is no provision for that in the Bill. Despite that, we are currently designing our Scotland. Civic Scotland, combined with academia and business, is already coming together to design the country we want to live in. Discussions in think-tanks and at public meetings about the Scotland we want to be are common occurrences. There is a growing awareness that Scotland, with the right powers, can reform our energy business, banking sector, and agriculture and fishing industries.

We could even negotiate our own trade deals, like Norway, Iceland and the Faroe Islands do. The Faroe Islands negotiate their own trade deals because the Danish Government respect and trust them. We could each define our own future and still be trading partners and valued neighbours, while continuing to help and support each other, but only if that is achieved through mutual respect for each other’s sovereignty. And there is the rub: clause 11 shows no respect or trust for Scotland or any of the devolved authorities.

Dr Tobias Lock, a senior lecturer at Edinburgh Law School, has said:

“The European Union (Withdrawal) Bill will result in a shift in balance between the powers Westminster has in practice and the powers Holyrood has in practice with Westminster’s powers being augmented and Holyrood’s staying the same.

That concern is shared by Professor Nicola McEwen, professor of territorial politics at the University of Edinburgh. She identifies that clause 11 is fundamentally a problem of trust. The UK Government do not trust the devolved Governments to refrain from using repatriated powers to create policy and regulatory divergence that might harm the UK’s internal market and create problems in trade negotiations. This, she argues, overlooks the considerable constitutional authority that the UK Parliament already retains over market regulation, trade, and the making and implementation of international treaties. For their part, the Scottish and Welsh Governments do not trust the commitment of the UK Government to devolve repatriated powers after Brexit and/or to agree and govern UK common frameworks on a genuinely co-operative basis. Once the existing imbalance has been augmented, when will it be realigned?

Scotland, if given the right powers, could negotiate with the European economic area and European Free Trade Association to seek what is best for Scotland but not detrimental to the rest of the UK. However, we are hamstrung by a UK Government who are scared of their own shadow, constantly looking over their shoulder and wondering from where the next challenge or crisis will emerge. We have a UK Government propped up by bluster and buffoonery.

Individuals may be protected by personal wealth that generates self-confidence and self-assurance, and supports a “devil may care” attitude—one that nudges us forward, assuring us that it will be all right on the night—but the vast majority of people in the UK are less well protected from the economic turmoil that lies ahead. They have concerns about jobs, pensions and visas. They have rightly turned to the UK Government time and again for reassurance, but their concerns are not being addressed. All that has been offered is a sickly mix of jingoistic imperialism. The Scottish Government wish to bring clarity and seek the powers to govern responsibly, but clause 11 does not provide that authority or opportunity. It must be amended forthwith, and the powers due to the Scottish Parliament—powers that will be best used by the Scottish Government, in the best interests of the citizens of Scotland—must be repatriated to the Scottish Parliament immediately after the UK leaves the European Union.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Skidmore): I rise to support clause 11 and schedule 3. Let me say at the outset how grateful I am to all Members for their contributions to the six-hour debate that we have had so far today, and for the thoughtful consideration that has been given to this part of the Bill. I assure the Committee that I shall listen carefully to, and take very seriously, all the views that are expressed on these issues.

The Government have been clear about the fact that the Bill is about continuity, certainty and control. That applies equally, and without exception, to people in businesses in all parts of the United Kingdom. Clause 11 is about delivering certainty while guaranteeing all the existing powers of the devolved institutions. The current devolution settlements reflect the UK’s membership of the EU, and on that basis, they provide that devolved institutions cannot act or legislate in a way that is incompatible with EU law.

Ian Murray: I apologise to the Minister for interrupting him so early in his speech. Many members of his own party have said that clause 11 is deficient and requires amendment. Does he believe that, and, if so, how does he intend to amend it to make it less deficient?

Chris Skidmore: I will set out the Government’s position in due course during my speech. [Interruption.] The hon. Gentleman intervened within 30 seconds of the beginning of my speech, and he is not accepting the answer that I have barely been able to give. I hope he will appreciate that I have a speech about the amendments to get through. Let me say at the outset how grateful I am to all Members for their contributions to the six-hour debate that we have had so far today, and for the thoughtful consideration that has been given to this part of the Bill. I assure the Committee that I shall listen carefully to, and take very seriously, all the views that are expressed on these issues.

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process of EU negotiations. We must ensure that the Prime Minister has the opportunity to reach out to Brussels, but I am here to discuss clause 11 and schedule 3 and the amendments, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman will allow me to continue to do so.

I was talking about the common approaches that enable us to trade with each other in the knowledge that we share agreed standards. We have agreed approaches on how to manage our common resources, and the UK can enter into international agreements knowing that we, as a country, can meet our obligations. As we leave the EU, the simple question is about where we need to retain the common approaches in EU law and where we do not. In the immediate term, clause 11 and part 1 of schedule 3 create a mechanism for those common approaches to continue to apply throughout the UK after exit.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister speaks of common approaches across the EU. We have heard today about the possibility of an alignment between the Northern Irish arrangements and those of the Republic and the rest of the EU. How will we retain those common approaches if, for instance, the UK negotiates a new trade deal post-customs union, and we end up with circumstances in which that would, or would not, apply to Northern Ireland? How on earth can the Minister reconcile that with the offer that the Government have been talking about today?

Chris Skidmore: I note that the hon. Gentleman has just walked into the Chamber. He is welcome to make a speech later on setting out his own principles; I would listen to that very carefully. I am addressing clause 11 and schedule 3 to the Bill. There is a time and a place for the wider discussions he wants.

10.15 pm

So, returning to clause 11, it makes clear provision in relation to devolved legislative competence. In addition, the clause provides that any modification of retained EU law that would have been within the competence of the devolved legislatures before exit day will continue to be within their competence after exit day; I can confirm to my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) that point that he wished to be made. For example, where there is an EU directive that provides member states with discretion on the details of implementing an EU obligation, this clause ensures that devolved legislatures will retain any such flexibility to change that implementing legislation in line with the underlying directive as it stood immediately before exit day. In other words, a cast-iron guarantee is written into the Bill that no decision-making powers are taken away from the devolved Administrations as we leave the EU.

The arrangements I have described are temporary measures. The discussions that have already begun with the devolved Administrations will allow us to identify where common approaches will need to be retained to maintain the necessary common standards and frameworks of the UK domestic market, to fulfil our international obligations, to empower the UK as an open trading nation, to strike the best trade deals around the world, and to protect the common resources of our islands.

Crucially, the discussions and work we are undertaking now with the devolved Administrations will help us establish where common approaches are not necessary. I want to emphasise that we believe that in the majority of the policy areas where EU law intersects with devolved competence, common frameworks will not be required at all, or can be achieved through non-legislative means like concordats, and in these cases clause 11 provides a mechanism to release decision-making powers from the temporary competence arrangement through the Order in Council procedure, giving new powers to the devolved Administrations.

Deidre Brock: On the temporary nature of these proposals, why have the Government not chosen just to put in place a sunset clause? Why is no date indicated, because the lack of one creates an enormous amount of uncertainty for everyone?

Chris Skidmore: The issue around placing a sunset clause on this provision is that, in a way, it creates an artificial cliff edge. The sole purpose of clause 11 is to ensure that the UK statute book is complete on exit day. We want to ensure that we work towards common frameworks, and that we can ensure that, when we have that statute book prepared for exit day, we have common frameworks and non-common frameworks in place. Having a sunset clause creates an artificial cliff edge to work towards that date, whereas we might want to create some of those frameworks before that date, and there might need to be some corrections to the withdrawal agreement and the EU withdrawal agreement Bill that has been announced, and some deficiencies that need to be corrected. Having a sunset clause is therefore unhelpful for the purposes of this clause in itself.

Returning to the issue of the policy areas where EU law intersects with devolved competence, as I have said, common frameworks will not always be required, or can be achieved through non-legislative means like concordats, and in such cases clause 11 provides a mechanism to release decision-making powers from the temporary competence arrangement through the Order in Council procedure, giving new powers to the devolved Administrations.

Pete Wishart: I am listening carefully to the Minister’s speech, but I am not hearing much about addressing the concerns of the devolved Parliaments and Assemblies, which are clearly saying that what is being proposed drives a coach and horses through the devolution settlement. How on earth is the Minister going to take on board their real concerns about what this Bill does to devolution, not least through clause 11?

Chris Skidmore: I have listened for six hours to the concerns of Members, but outside this Chamber there is an entire process that I want to touch on later in my speech, and which I hope the hon. Gentleman will reflect upon. There might be hostility in this Chamber from those who say that the Government are somehow taking clause 11 and ripping up the devolution settlement, but that is hyperbole. Clause 11 is a temporary competence limit that is being applied simply by taking EU law and it becoming EU retained law.

Mike Gapes: Will the Minister give way?

Chris Skidmore: No, not at the moment.
There are no powers that the devolved Administrations currently have that they will be losing. We have therefore had tremendous engagement on the framework that we are developing, and I will touch on that engagement shortly. In particular, in the JMC (EN) process there has been huge goodwill from the colleagues of the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) in the Scottish Government, and his officials, above all, working tirelessly behind the scenes, trying to deliver on what we need to do.

Chris Elmore: The Minister uses the word “temporary”. How long is temporary, and why is that not specified in the Bill?

Chris Skidmore: The hon. Gentleman points to the word “temporary”, and I repeat that this is a temporary competence limit—[Interruption.] He wants to know how long temporary is. It is as long as it takes to ensure that we have a complete statute book that is in the interests of continuity, certainty and control for UK businesses. We want to ensure that we have time to be able to correct the statute book and ensure that this is done properly. To create an artificial time limit would be unhelpful to this process. As he knows, the First Minister of Wales is going forward with the JMC (EN) process. That engagement is taking place, and I will talk about that later in my speech. This means that when it comes to ensuring that we have the temporary competence limit on the face of the Bill, the Order in Council process gives new—

Mike Gapes: Will the Minister give way?

Chris Skidmore: No, I have given way a lot—[Interruption.] I am going to carry on with my speech; otherwise I will not get through it. Other Members want to speak, and although I could stand here and take up all the rest of the time, I think it would be inappropriate to do so.

The Order in Council procedure will provide an opportunity for those powers to be returned to the devolved Administrations. This highlights a well-established procedure for adapting the parameters of the devolved competence, which requires debate and approval in the UK Parliament and the relevant devolved legislatures. It is absolutely right that the devolved legislatures are able to debate and consider any additional areas of competence being released to them through this mechanism. Of course we acknowledge that the Scottish and Welsh Governments have taken a different view on the mechanism to provide the necessary certainty, but we are in agreement that common frameworks will be needed in some areas. In some cases, legislative frameworks might be required, and we hope to continue working closely with our counterparts in the devolved Administrations to establish exactly what those will look like.

Ian C. Lucas: I am puzzled. The Minister has made it clear that the Government’s intention is to maintain the current legislative situation, so far as the clause is concerned. Why then did he not seek agreement with the Welsh and Scottish Governments before he brought this legislation to the Chamber? Why did he not achieve a resolved position before coming to the Chamber with the Bill?

Chris Skidmore: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the clock is ticking, and that we have a limited amount of time in which to ensure that our statute book is prepared for exit day. We are determined to do that, because we need that certainty, control and stability. Businesses need to know that the statute book will be complete on exit day.

We have had a tremendous amount of engagement with our Welsh and Scottish partners, and I am perfectly happy to place in the Library records of the meetings between the First Secretary of State and his counterparts so that Members can see the level of engagement involved. I think that they would be quite struck by the number of meetings that have taken place and the work that has gone on behind the scenes. Members might be hostile in the Chamber today, but their Welsh and Scottish counterparts are working constructively with the UK Government because they recognise that we need some serious politics here and that we need to ensure that we have certainty and control for businesses.

Ian C. Lucas: Will the Minister give way?

Chris Skidmore: No, only once for each person. I will give way to the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford).

Dr Whitford: Why will having a Brexit date give certainty and clarity, yet having a date on which the powers would move to the devolved Governments is considered unacceptable?

Chris Skidmore: We will be discussing the clause 10 powers to which the hon. Lady refers on a separate day—on the morning of day five. Clause 11 is about ensuring that the statute book is prepared for exit day. In a way, exit day provides that temporary limit. We know that we need to make changes to the common framework, but beyond that, we do not yet know what the negotiation period will look like when it comes to ensuring that we need an implementation period. That is why we cannot necessarily provide that certainty.

Several hon. Members rose—

Chris Skidmore: I will give way to the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) now.

Mike Gapes: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. Clause 11(3) refers to the Northern Ireland Assembly. Is the position for Scotland and Wales the same in the Bill as it is for Northern Ireland, given that the Good Friday agreement is underpinned by an international treaty between two countries and that it explicitly mentions the European Union?

Chris Skidmore: We are moving on to some of the clause 10 issues around international obligations, but when it comes to schedule 3, which I had hoped to touch upon later in my speech, we are determined to ensure that we obtain legislative consent from all the relevant devolved Administrations. Although the Assembly is absent, we are already working with officials in Northern Ireland to ensure that their perspective is reflected, but we are determined to move forward as the United Kingdom, which includes Northern Ireland.
Martin Whitfield: Does the Minister envisage requesting the legislative consent motions before explaining what amendments the Government are going to make to the Bill?

Chris Skidmore: As I have stated, the Government’s intention is to seek legislative consent for the Bill from all the devolved Administrations, where possible. We have already seen legislative consent memorandums being tabled in Scotland and Wales, and we are determined to ensure that we work with all our devolved partners and with officials in Northern Ireland and that we legislate on behalf of the United Kingdom.

Mr Leslie: When?

Chris Skidmore: I am going to carry on with my speech. The hon. Gentleman has already intervened and now he decides to—[Interruption.]

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. We cannot have sedentary interventions. If the Minister wants to give way, he will give way.

Chris Skidmore: We have been working closely with the devolved Administrations on these questions and will continue to do so, progressing the discussions and the necessary analysis of where common approaches are and are not needed, through ongoing bilateral and multilateral discussions between Ministers and officials.

In an excellent speech, my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) highlighted the important progress that was made at the recent JMC (EN) meeting on 16 October, when the UK Government, the Scottish Government and the Welsh Government agreed to a set of principles to identify where we will need frameworks. Given the myth busting that needs to take place around the JMC (EN) process, given how open and transparent it already is, it may be appropriate to quote from a communiqué regarding an agreement by all the devolved Governments and the First Secretary of State on the definition and principles of the common frameworks. It states:

“As the UK leaves the European Union, the Government of the United Kingdom and the devolved administrations agree to work together to establish common approaches in some areas that are currently governed by EU law, but that are otherwise within areas of competence of the devolved administrations or legislatures. A framework will set out a common UK, or GB, approach and how it will be operated and governed. This may consist of common goals, minimum or maximum standards, harmonisation, limits on action, or mutual recognition, depending on the policy area and the objectives being pursued. Frameworks may be implemented by legislation, by executive action, by memorandums of understanding, or by other means depending on the context in which the framework is intended to operate.”

The communiqué then goes on to set out some important principles for where common frameworks “will be established where they are necessary in order to: enable the functioning of the UK internal market, while acknowledging policy divergence; ensure compliance with international obligations.”

Jenny Chapman: I may be able to save the Minister a job here. New clause 64 includes what he is reading out, word for word. Given that he supports the principles, is he not inclined to accept new clause 64?

Chris Skidmore: The hon. Lady did not touch on the communiqué and seemed to push it to one side without acknowledging the importance of the process. When the JMC (EN) process is taking place, her new clause is unnecessary. I will touch on why it is unnecessary to legislate when we have all this work ongoing to provide flexibility for the devolved Administrations to draw up a communiqué exactly like this one.

To carry on with what I was saying, common frameworks will “enable the management of common resources; administer and provide access to justice in cases with a cross-border element; safeguard the security of the UK.”

The frameworks will also “respect the devolution settlements and the democratic accountability of the devolved legislatures, and will therefore: be based on established conventions and practices, including that the competence of the devolved institutions will not normally be adjusted without their consent; maintain, as a minimum, equivalent flexibility for tailoring policies to the specific needs of each territory as is afforded by current EU rules; lead to a significant increase in decision-making powers for the devolved administrations.”

In the absence of Northern Ireland Executive Ministers, the Northern Ireland civil service will continue to be part of these discussions. We are building on the positive and constructive joint working between our Administrations to continue to accelerate our progress on common approaches. For example, there is ongoing work between officials from the devolved Administrations and the UK Government on how policy areas intersect with the devolution settlement. There have been several deep dives into those policy areas, and the work will be presented at the next JMC (EN) on 12 December, where we hope to make further progress by assessing more of the detailed work that has been carried out.

10.30 pm

Angus Brendan MacNeil: How does the UK Government’s approach to working together with the devolved Administrations differ from their approach to working together with, say, Dublin and the other members of the EU27? Is one not a meeting of equals and the other a meeting of master and underling?

Chris Skidmore: The work on the common frameworks that clause 11 addresses points to the fact that we are keenly working with the devolved Administrations on drawing up those frameworks. We have an absolute commitment to ensuring that we can look at the principles that were agreed between our Governments on 16 October and that explicitly recognise that frameworks will not be needed in many of the areas currently governed by EU law.

As we have said from the outset, the Bill starts a process that will lead to a significant increase in decision-making powers. That is not a power grab. We are ensuring that more powers go back to the devolved Administrations and legislatures.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): The Minister talks about the constructive relationship with the devolved Administrations. Has he taken time to look at what they have said about the shambles today?

Chris Skidmore: A bit of a wasted intervention. I am here to talk about clause 11. I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman has read the clause, but he came in slightly late.
Wes Streeting: I came for your speech.

Chris Skidmore: The hon. Gentleman is very kind, but we are discussing the effect of clause 11 and schedule 3—that is the purpose of Committee.

Several hon. Members rose—

Chris Skidmore: I have already given way.

We want to build momentum over the coming months in the continued bilateral and multilateral discussions between Ministers and officials. Let me be clear that the Government are the party committed to devolution. Our record shows that, and we will continue to press on with devolution. Working through these frameworks is part of that, but we also want to protect the benefits of our Union across the UK and across each of our constituent nations, benefitting us all.

Ian Murray: Will the Minister give way?

Chris Skidmore: No.

I am grateful to hon. Members for raising important points of detail on the ongoing framework process. They are right to acknowledge that work has been done today on agreeing the guiding principles for the future frameworks, and that the further analysis is the product of the ongoing engagement between officials and Ministers in the UK Government and the devolved Administrations. Of course, the outcomes of those discussions are important not just to Governments but, most crucially, to the people and businesses across the UK to whom the rules apply.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): The Minister is talking about the impact on people in the UK. Under the Good Friday agreement, people in Northern Ireland can choose to be British or Irish, or both. Will that remain the case after Brexit? If so, seeing as Ireland remains a member of the EU, will people in Northern Ireland still be able to choose to be EU citizens?

Chris Skidmore: I do not disagree with what the hon. Lady says. It is important to note that, when it comes to the common frameworks procedure, the communiqué agreed on 16 October states:

“Frameworks will ensure recognition of the economic and social linkages between Northern Ireland and Ireland and that Northern Ireland will be the only part of the UK that shares a land frontier with the EU. They will also adhere to the Belfast Agreement.”

By way of myth busting, it is not the case whatsoever that the Good Friday agreement will somehow be affected.

Clause 11 introduces part 1 of schedule 3, which makes the same provisions in relation to devolved Executive competence—that is, any secondary legislation that the devolved Administrations might make. In addition, provisions in the Bill extend competence to the devolved Administrations so that devolved Ministers can exercise the powers provided by clause 10 and schedule 2 to make the statute book operate effectively once we have left the EU.

In recognition of the current standing of the existing devolution settlements, part 2 of schedule 3 ensures that a significant number of corrections are made to the devolution statutes arising from the UK’s exit from the EU. Together, clause 11 and schedule 3 preserve the current scope of devolved competence. They ensure that any decision that could have been taken by the devolved Administrations and legislatures prior to exit day can still be made after exit day, and that devolved Ministers can exercise powers to make sure that law in areas of devolved competence works correctly. They set up the Order-in-Council process, which will allow for an increase in decision-making powers of the devolved institutions as discussions with the devolved Administrations on common frameworks progress. The Government have repeatedly stated, as I have today, that this is a temporary arrangement; it is a safeguard against a cliff-edge situation as we leave the EU to provide certainty for people and businesses in all parts of the UK. Just as importantly, it allows time for discussion about the future: on where common approaches are needed and where they are not. It is our overriding aim to work with the devolved Administrations to define which areas need frameworks and which do not as soon as possible.

It was absolutely right for the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) in the debate on clause 2 to raise the matter of consultation with the political parties in Northern Ireland in the absence of a power-sharing Executive. I would like to reassure her that this Government value the views of those parties on the devolution provisions in the Bill, and officials have provided briefings on the Bill to each of the parties represented in the Northern Ireland Assembly that wanted them. In addition, officials have been engaging with their counterparts in the Northern Ireland civil service on the technical and legal aspects of the Bill to make sure it operates properly in the context of Northern Ireland law. That is, of course, no substitute for a devolved Government in Northern Ireland, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland continues to prioritise the talks between parties to restore the power-sharing Executive. This Government are sincere in their wish to discuss these matters, particularly with regard to common frameworks, with the Northern Ireland Executive when they are restored.

I reiterate that I welcome scrutiny by the House on the approach the Government have taken. I also welcome the vital contributions that the Scottish Government and the Welsh Government, and the devolved legislatures, have made to today’s debate by publishing their views on how—

Ian Murray: I feel that the Minister may be finishing his remarks. I intervened at the beginning of his speech to ask whether he would tell us where he thinks clause 11 is deficient, as many of his colleagues have said it is, and how he thinks that, as the Minister responsible for it, he is going to fix those deficiencies.

Chris Skidmore: As I stated at the opening of my remarks, and as I will state throughout my speech and at the end of my remarks, we are open to hearing from those who seriously want to look at this Bill and consider how we productively ensure that our statute book is complete on exit day. We are in a Committee stage at the moment and there is a process to go through here, and there is a process outside this House in the JMC, which I have spoken about. It is not for me as a Minister to prejudge the discussions that may take place at JMC (EN) next week, on 12 December. What I will say is that I will ensure that when it comes to the agenda of that meeting, the discussions that have taken place in Committee are reflected and discussed in JMC (EN).
Stephen Doughty: I thank the Minister for what he is saying, but it is clear that the Welsh Government and the Scottish Government, and Members of this House working with them, have proposed clear and specific amendments that are not about blocking the Bill or undoing Brexit; they are about retaining a stable constitutional settlement in these islands. Will he accept those amendments, as his colleague the Secretary of State for Scotland said he might?

Chris Skidmore: I am discussing whether the clause should stand part of the Bill and I am about to turn to the hon. Gentleman’s amendments. I hope that he can wait in eager anticipation for my remarks and that he will not be disappointed, although he may be.

I reiterate that I welcome scrutiny by the House on the approach that the Government have taken. As I said, I also welcome the vital contributions the Scottish Government, Welsh Government and devolved legislatures have made in this debate by publishing their views on how devolution aspects of the Bill might be improved. This Government are clear that we want to consider all those views and make improvements to the Bill where we can, but I also emphasise that it is right that we provide certainty across the UK, as this clause seeks to do, and do not take any action to undermine the integrity of our United Kingdom.

I will also take a moment to reflect on the insightful contribution made by my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin), informed by the evidence to and input from the members of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee. He made a number of pertinent points and I will turn to those now. He is right to say that leaving the EU is that opportunity to revisit some key constitutional questions. As I have set out today, the Government’s aim in introducing clause 11 is to do precisely that: to give us time to give these important issues the consideration they deserve.

We welcome the views of experts such as my hon. Friend and his Committee on these issues of intergovernmental institutional relationships. The Government are ensuring that we engage with other external experts such as leading academics on these questions. What we are focused on today is how we provide that certainty and continuity we need in the law on exit day and how we give ourselves time to consider the issues properly and reach the right answers. I welcome my hon. Friend’s continued contributions to this discussion.

New clause 64, which relates to the creation of common frameworks, comprise three subsections and I will take each in turn. First, the new clause would require the Government to lay their proposals for the replacement of European frameworks with UK ones before each House of Parliament. It is not the position of the UK Government, or of the devolved Administrations, that the existing UK frameworks will be replaced by our own common frameworks in every instance. Instead, we expect more power to sit directly with the devolved Administrations as a result of our leaving the EU.

As I mentioned earlier, we are working closely with the devolved Administrations to determine where future frameworks—whether legislative or non-legislative—will be required in each of the policy areas in question. Although joint conclusions have not been drawn at this point—as I have stated, I do not want to prejudice the outcome of the discussions with the devolved Administrations—we believe that the majority of policy areas will not require legislative frameworks.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Surely the determination is very simple. It is set down in the Scotland Act 1998 that what is not reserved is devolved, so if it comes from Europe, it will be devolved. It is set down and it is simple. It should not be up to the Minister to be judge and jury. He talks about partnership, but he should respect the law.

Chris Skidmore: As I set out clearly at the beginning of my speech, when current EU law—which it is the UK’s position not to breach—is transferred to become retained EU law, we need to look at the areas where we need to create common frameworks. That is the position that the hon. Gentleman’s own Brexit Minister, Mike Russell, has taken. Mike Russell signed the communiqué and agreed to look at these common approaches and to look at retained EU law being transferred across.

The hon. Gentleman should speak to members of the Scottish Government, because they seem to understand the need to work with the UK Government to come up with common frameworks. He seems to be unaware of the process of engagement that is taking place outside the House. His constituents will not thank him for bringing up constitutional points and not acknowledging that, in looking at the common frameworks procedure and at EU law, we need to ensure that, when it comes to exit day, there is certainty, control and stability in respect of our statute book. We need to ensure that clause 11 provides for that.

Should our detailed discussions conclude that UK-wide or parallel legislation is necessary, both Houses of Parliament will of course have an important role to play in scrutinising the detailed proposals. Where policy areas are released from the temporary arrangements provided for in clause 11, the Order in Council process provides a mechanism to do precisely that to ensure that these decisions are subject to careful scrutiny by both Houses of Parliament and the relevant devolved legislatures.

Secondly, the new clause would permit the establishment of frameworks only where the criteria set out in it are met. That is also unnecessary. Although I agree with the criteria, which, as the hon. Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman) pointed out, have been lifted by and large from the broader principles that underpin the creation of frameworks, they form only one part of the picture. The broader principles were agreed by the UK, Scottish and Welsh Governments at the meeting of the JMC (EN) on 16 October and were published in the communiqué that I have put on the record. To ensure that the interests of Northern Ireland were heard, a senior official from the Northern Ireland civil service was in attendance.

Those broader principles recognise, among other things, the importance of a wider range of issues, including “the economic and social linkages between Northern Ireland and Ireland”. Not only do we have an established set of detailed principles; we have put those principles into practice through a process of ongoing engagement and analysis with the devolved Administrations on where common frameworks are or are not needed. It therefore follows that the more limited set of criteria in the new clause is unnecessary.
Finally, the new clause would permit the creation of frameworks only if they were subject to consultation agreements with the affected devolved Administrations. Once again, that is unnecessary. As the agreed principles published in the communiqué make clear: “It will be the aim of all parties to agree where there is a need for common frameworks and the content of them.”

The Government are committed to intensive discussions on the areas where common frameworks will and will not be required with the devolved Administrations, and those are happening right now. I therefore urge the hon. Member for Darlington to withdraw the new clause.

New clause 65 seeks to enshrine the Joint Ministerial Committee in legislation. The Joint Ministerial Committee is a forum for the UK Government and the devolved Administrations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to discuss matters of joint interest and is underpinned by a memorandum of understanding between the four Administrations. Specifically, it provides for a focus of intergovernmental relations and allows attending Ministers to present the positions of their own Administration in a multilateral setting. There is no need to enshrine the JMC provisions in legislation as set out in new clause 65. Indeed, doing so would place limitations on the ability of the members to adapt to what is a rapidly changing political landscape.

The current basis for the JMC has been agreed by all four Administrations and allows for wide-ranging discussions, including on topical issues such as EU exit. The JMC, as set out by the written agreements, must remain adaptable enough to address those four Governments’ interests. If this clause were to be added to the statute book, it could severely hamper the JMC’s ability to do so.

The scope of the committee and its supporting sub-committees is not solely to discuss the domestic impact of EU exit and negotiations with the EU. The JMC plenary, which is chaired by the Prime Minister, should also continue to discuss matters agreed by the Administrations as set out by the terms of reference under subsection (1) (a). As drafted, new clause 65 would significantly limit the scope of the Joint Ministerial Committee. The provisions under subsection (1) are already being demonstrated through the JMC on EU negotiations sub-committee. My right hon. Friend the First Secretary of State chaired the most recent JMC (EN) meeting on 16 October and will chair a further meeting on 12 December to build on those discussions that have taken place so far.

There are also other sub-committees that are equally important for the integrity of intergovernmental relations. The provisions under subsection (5) stipulate that either my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister or my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union must chair all further meetings of the Joint Ministerial Committee until a withdrawal agreement is concluded. That would ignore the role of my right hon. Friend the First Secretary of State who chairs what I am sure will be recognised as an important sub-committee on EU negotiations as well as other sub-committees of the JMC that already exist, such as the sub-committee on Europe. Such provisions will remove the flexibility afforded to the Joint Ministerial Committee to adapt and evolve.

The existing written agreements coupled with the ongoing multilateral and bilateral engagement between Ministers and officials make this new clause redundant. The versatility of the committee is achieved through consensus of the participating Administrations and therefore we urge the Opposition not to press their amendment.

10.45 pm

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The hon. Gentleman talked earlier about co-operation and listening. Our party represents the Government of Scotland. Then there is the party that represents the Government of Wales. In this spirit of co-operation, which amendments will he be taking from either of those parties?

Chris Skidmore: I am currently going through the list of amendments and setting out the Government’s position on them. When it comes to looking at the Bill, the Government will listen to those who seek to improve it constructively. We are in Committee at the moment, and we have amendments and legislative consent memorandums that have been tabled by the Welsh and Scottish Governments. The Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), and I have been to Scotland to give evidence. My hon. Friend has also given evidence to Welsh Select Committees. We are determined that it is not just SNP Members who have a veto over this process. There is a consensus that we need to seek across all devolved Administrations—

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I have given way to the hon. Gentleman several times; I will not do so again.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Will the Minister give way?

Chris Skidmore: No, I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman came in relatively late. I have given way to him several times. I am making my point in response to the amendment, which he does not even want to listen to. The point is that there is a reasonableness test: the UK Government are determined to be the reasonable partner, but we will listen to anyone who puts forward amendments to the Bill and who is determined to ensure that our statute book is protected on exit day, that the UK integral internal market is protected, and that we have that stability, certainty and control that we need for businesses and for the people of Scotland, Wales, England and Northern Ireland, as they will not thank us if we do not work together to ensure that that is achieved. The point of clause 11 is to ensure that we have that stability, certainty and control.

I now turn to amendment 337, which is to be read with amendment 42 and new clause 64. It provides that existing EU law limits on devolved competence will remain in place until the end of the transitional period. At that point, amendment 42 would give the devolved Administrations and legislatures the power to legislate in relation to those matters currently subject to EU law but that are otherwise devolved.

I will discuss amendments 90 to 92, 132 to 134 and 164, which essentially provide the same effect as that of 42, which means that the devolved institutions will be able to diverge from those retained EU law frameworks after exit day. I will also deal with consequential amendments 177 to 179, 181, 185 and 191 to 193, which follow from those substantive amendments. I understand the intention behind these amendments, but we cannot
agree with the effects. I have already set out the measures in clause 11 that establish the temporary arrangement that maintains the current parameters of devolved competence, taking no decision-making power away from the devolved Administrations or legislatures. This means that where we have common approaches across the UK by virtue of EU law, they will continue to apply as they currently do after exit day.

It is vital that we provide certainty to businesses and to people who live and work across the UK, and that laws in place remain consistent while we work with the devolved Administrations to consider where we may need common approaches and where we do not. The amendments risk undermining not only that certainty, but out precious Union. Let me be clear: this Government are committed to ensuring that power sits closer to the people than ever before. Our commitment to strengthening the devolution settlements is clear from the statute book with, most recently, the Wales Act 2017 and the Scotland Act 2016, which has made the Scottish Parliament one of the most powerful devolved Parliaments in the world.

In line with our commitment to devolution, we have been clear that we expect the process of leaving the EU to result in a significant increase in the decision-making powers of the devolved Administrations. But we are also clear about how this must happen. We need careful analysis with the devolved Administrations to determine the areas where common UK-wide or GB-wide approaches need to be retained, and the areas where they do not.

Ian Murray: The Minister is addressing the amendments in my name and those of my hon. Friends. The hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) said that he agreed with the principles of my amendments 164 and 165, and that, although he would not vote for them, he expected that the Government would come back with something different to deal with the deficiencies in clause 11. I have not quite heard the Minister admit that the clause has deficiencies. What will he bring back to the Committee that it can vote on that will satisfy his own Scottish Conservative Members with regard to the principles of amendments 164 and 165?

Chris Skidmore: I have already stated that the Government are prepared to listen to all those who seek to improve the Bill. We will use this opportunity to reflect on all the speeches made by hon. Members in Committee; that is what Committee is for. I have stated a commitment to ensuring that the content of today’s debate is shared with all members of the JMC (EN) on 12 December. There is a process to look at the establishment of common frameworks, and the careful analysis needs to take place with the consent of or working with the devolved Administrations and their officials. I am pleased that we have made good progress on this with the agreement at JMC (EN) with the Scottish and Welsh Governments on the principles that will guide our future framework discussions.

Stephen Doughty: The Minister is being generous in giving way. My name is on a number of these amendments. Will he be absolutely clear on one point? The Welsh Government and the Scottish Government have tabled amendments in good faith that are aimed at being constructive and making the Bill more sensible, with the support of many Members across the Committee. Indeed, Members of the Minister’s own party have pointed out problems with the Bill. Am I correct that, despite those points, he is not going to accept any of the amendments?

Chris Skidmore: We have always made it clear that we stand ready to listen to those who offer improvements to the Bill. Engagement at all levels of government— Interruption. The hon. Gentleman does not want to listen to what I have to say. He wants me to accept an amendment; I have given way several times, yet he is not prepared to listen to what the Minister has to say. Engagement at all levels of government is a usual part of the process, and this engagement must be at all levels of discussion, not just that which takes place in this Chamber. We want to work with the devolved Administrations, and we have been clear that we would like all parts of the UK to come together in support of this legislation, which is crucial for delivering the outcome of the referendum.

We continue to believe that the provisions in clause 11 are vital to providing the necessary immediate certainty to people and businesses while we discuss where common frameworks are and are not needed. We recognise that the Scottish and Welsh Governments have taken different positions from our approach, and we welcome the contribution to the debate. We remain open to suggestions and thoughts about how to ensure that the Bill works to deliver a functioning statute book for all parts of the UK. However, we cannot accept changes that would undermine the UK’s internal market or increase difficulties for people and businesses.

We are also clear how this process must happen. As I have said, we need the analyses to take place. We are clear that we will make progress with the JMC (EN), and that we will ensure that our final analysis indicates that legislative frameworks will be unnecessary for a majority of those policy areas. Following the agreement of the principles of the JMC (EN), we have already commenced work with the devolved Administrations, building on the work that is taking place at both ministerial and official level to make quick progress on the potential role for frameworks in some specific policies areas including agriculture, justice, home affairs and public health, where deep dives have taken place with officials from all Administrations. This work is allowing us to explore the different form the frameworks could take.

I should say that a legislative framework is by no means the only method. Indeed, as I said, legislative frameworks are likely to be used in a limited number of areas. There is far more use for non-legislative frameworks, including memorandums of understanding, concordats and informal collaborative working arrangements, as already happens.

In removing clause 11, these amendments fail to recognise the importance and value of our internal market and of having consistent rules for individuals and companies. They pre-empt the vital work we are undertaking with the devolved Administrations, and prejudice the outcome of our negotiations with the EU. Until we know the outcome of those negotiations, we cannot have certainty over how these powers, in places, will relate to our future relationship with the EU or, therefore, at what level they should be exercised in the future.
I note that Members have referred to evidence given to various Committees. I have heard their points, but it is important to come back to the motivation and need for the Bill: to provide certainty and control.

Sir Stephen Laws, formerly first parliamentary counsel, has pointed out that the devolution settlements were agreed in the context of our EU membership. That is why we are focusing through our discussions on common frameworks with the devolved Administrations on what our constitutional arrangements should be outside the context of our EU membership. That is what the provisions in the Bill give us the space to do, by maintaining the parameters of devolved competence.

I stress again that the mechanism here is not an end; it is an important first step in the process of returning these powers from the EU to the UK, enabling us to do the necessary work to determine where further powers can be released to the devolved Administrations.

I must reiterate that I understand the intention behind the amendments—that powers sit at the right level once we have left the EU. I am clear that the process we are going through does not change our unshakeable commitment to ensure that devolution in the UK is even further strengthened so that we may have more devolution and more union across the UK.

I turn now to amendment 165, which I will take with consequential amendments 180, 182 to 191, 194 and 195, tabled by the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray). Amendment 165 would allow the Scottish and Welsh Governments to make secondary legislation to change retained EU law in the areas that are currently subject to EU law. Taken together with other provisions of the Bill, part 1 of schedule 3 is intended to maintain the common frameworks across the UK that have been created by EU law. In particular, that will ensure that no new barriers to people living and doing business across the UK are created after we leave the EU.

As I have made clear, the Bill guarantees that the current decision-making powers of the devolved Administrations are respected. Anything the devolved Administrations could do before exit day they will be able to do after exit day. Our priority must now be to prepare our statute book for exit, and we want to work closely with the devolved Administrations to do that.

It is through the work on the common frameworks and the discussions with the devolved Administrations that we can make progress on specific areas and seize the opportunities to improve policy in the UK. As I mentioned earlier, the next JMC (EN) is scheduled to take place on 12 December, and it will continue that accelerated process of assessing where frameworks are needed and where they are not. We will prioritise those areas of greatest interest and significance.

We very much hope to see further steps forward, but it is right that we do these things in discussion and collaboratively with all Governments across the UK. Once it has been agreed through ongoing engagement, which this Government are committed to, where common frameworks are not required, we can use the Order in Council power to release decision-making powers to devolved Administrations. For that reason, the amendment is unnecessary, and we would urge the hon. Gentleman not to press it.

Let me turn now to amendment 72, tabled by the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), which would enshrine a requirement for the Government to seek a legislative consent motion from the devolved legislatures. As the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester, said on day one of Committee stage, we want to make a positive case in favour of legislative consent for this vital piece of legislation and to work closely with the devolved Administrations and legislatures to achieve that. As I have mentioned, there has been an extensive programme of engagement with the Scottish and Welsh Governments and legislatures. In the absence of the Executive in Northern Ireland, official level engagement also continues with the Northern Ireland civil service.

We do not recognise the need for this amendment. The Government have already explicitly recognised the role of the Sewel convention in the Wales Act 2017 and the Scotland Act 2016. I ask hon. Members to look at our track record: we are committed to the devolution settlements and the conventions that we have established.

We continue to believe in the importance of the Bill, which is in the national interest, and we will work to deliver it with the devolved Administrations. The question of ensuring certainty both for our statute book and our internal market when we leave the EU is of great significance to all parts of the UK. We would like all parts of the UK to come together in support of this legislation, which is vital to the securing of a smooth and orderly exit. I urge the hon. Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman) to withdraw the motion.

11 pm

Several hon. Members rose—

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. As colleagues will see, a number of hon. Members still want to speak. If interventions are kept to a minimum and speeches are kept under about eight minutes, everybody will get in.

Mike Gapes: Having listened to this debate for seven hours and been in the Chamber for most of it, I can say that occasionally it was like watching paint dry. I want to comment on something that the Minister just said: that the Government cannot accept changes that would undermine the UK internal market or businesses. That seems a little ironic on the day the Prime Minister has shown how strong and stable she is and when we are in such a crisis over Northern Ireland and the issues relating to the Good Friday agreement.

Sadly, Democratic Unionist party Members seem to have gone AWOL; I assume that they are out discussing how to spend £1 billion. They, of course, were not part of the negotiations that led to the Good Friday agreement and were not happy when we brought in the institutional frameworks established as a result of the 1998 legislation. I had the pleasure of being in Mo Mowlam’s team during those negotiations. I was a very minor person in the process—as the Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Political Development Minister, my good friend Paul Murphy—but it was a great achievement of our Labour Government.

As Tony Blair has so eloquently put it and John Major has also said, today the Good Friday agreement is in danger. Those of us who have looked at these issues understand that the agreement has three strands. One is the internal political situation in Northern Ireland,
which is clearly not going well. The Assembly and Executive are not functioning and the civic forum that was supposed to be established under the Good Friday agreement does not exist.

Then there is strand 2, which is the Irish dimension, the North South Ministerial Council and the implementation bodies; it is supposed to cover agriculture, education, transport, the environment, health and EU programmes. Strand 2 is going to be undermined by the decision to leave the single market and the customs union.

Then there is strand 3, which is the east-west British-Irish Council and the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference. We now understand that the Irish Government are right to express concerns about the position we face. I was in Dublin three weeks ago with the Foreign Affairs Committee. We also went to County Cavan. We drove along the road that goes from one side of the border to the other, and back across, through County Monaghan. The only way anyone knows they are in Northern Ireland is that there is a building with a “Fireworks for sale” sign. Fireworks cannot be sold in the Irish Republic, but they can be bought in Northern Ireland—that is a bit ironic, but we will not go there.

The reality is that we have fields on both sides of the border, cows that move backwards and forwards, farmhouses that are divided and institutional structures such as the veterinary organisations. We have the milk that is taken from cows in the south and cows in the north, put together in the same factory, mixed together with whiskey, and comes out as Baileys, which is then marketed as an Irish whiskey derivative, and there is an all-Ireland trade arrangement on that basis. Similarly, with tourism, Northern Ireland and the Republic are promoted together globally.

We are putting all this in jeopardy—putting it all at risk. We have to understand how difficult it was to get the Good Friday agreement and how not necessarily just the reality of the economics but the symbolism of the politics will come back, and people will have to think about their differences rather than what unites them. At the moment, there are many Irish citizens living in Northern Ireland because one can have either a British passport or an Irish passport—it does not matter. Will the European Court of Justice apply to those people living in Northern Ireland? Will they have protection even though they are living in the UK? These are interesting and complicated issues.

The Mayor of London, the Welsh Government and the Scottish Government have all said that we need to stay in the single market and the customs union, but above all we need to listen to the voices of the people of Northern Ireland, who want us to stay in the single market and the customs union. Although they claim the contrary, Democratic Unionist party Members do not speak for Northern Ireland—they speak only for one part of Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland voted to remain. Northern Ireland, collectively, wants to keep the institutions of the Good Friday agreement.

It is fundamentally important that we recognise in this Bill that there are special circumstances relating to Northern Ireland. When I intervened on the Minister—eventually he gave way to me—he did not respond to my point, which was that there is no specific understanding of the differences in Northern Ireland. The all-Irish Good Friday agreement—Belfast agreement—institutional framework is crucial and fundamental, and we have to preserve it and keep it. We will break up the United Kingdom and we will cause dangers and conflict again on the island of Ireland. We will damage relations with our closest neighbour and best friend. We have such a good British-Irish relationship, as we saw when Her Majesty the Queen went to Croke Park, and as Mary McAleese told us when she was the Irish President at the time. That is at risk, and we must not let it happen. Please, please support the continuation of the Good Friday agreement.

Alison Thewliss: I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes), because that was an absolutely perfect speech. It had to be made and I am glad that he did it.

We have talked in general terms today about lots of the things to do with the new clause and what it might mean, about clause 11, and about the 111 things that require some attention. I want to look at how issues of waste are dealt with within the EU. The EU waste framework directive flows into the Waste (Scotland) Regulations 2012. The European landfill directive, the European packaging and packaging waste directive, and various other EU directives are currently implemented by the Scottish Government. The EU sets the rules within those frameworks and directives, and the Scottish Government have flexibility, as do the other devolved nations, on how they implement them.

Without any certainty over what happens on the day of Brexit, we can have no deal, no certainty and no regulation of those matters. In Scotland, we have developed a circular economy strategy and made a lot of progress towards the implementation of the EU’s circular economy action plan. We have made more progress than the rest of the UK has, and we have made different progress. The directives have given us the flexibility to take a different road. Were the matter to come back to the UK Government, we could not be guaranteed the flexibility we need to make progress with the plans that we have already embarked on.

The Local Government Information Unit recently produced an excellent briefing on waste disposal and Brexit. The briefing raises specific concerns about the future UK directive, which could well be less ambitious than our plans. We have heard a lot from various Tories in the past about cutting red tape and regulations, but doing so could have a serious impact on the interesting and important issue of waste collection. Scotland’s zero waste plan is award winning and ambitious, as we are on climate change. We should have full control over it, and we should not have to drag behind the UK if it does not wish to step forward as quickly as we do.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): The hon. Lady says that the plan is ambitious, but, in practice, waste from Scotland is simply being transferred into England, and there is very little enforcement of the so-called zero waste plan.

Alison Thewliss: I would take issue with that, and our plan is ambitious. An awful lot of our plan depends on the existence of a European market for waste. Lots of waste goes backwards and forwards to Europe for processing.
There has been no clear detail from the Government about what they mean by an interim period or a temporary period before further powers are released to the Scottish Government. We already know that the market for waste exists, and taking that market away will create uncertainty. Businesses face huge uncertainty, because there is a big private market in waste; I have a large processing facility in my constituency, for example. The Confederation of Paper Industries has said that its members need to be sure which regulations they will have to operate under. If paper is going into European markets, it needs to meet the standards required by those markets, so we need the regulations in place to allow that to happen.

Hon. Members might not know that paper is a £6.5 billion industry. The UK is the world’s largest net importer of paper, and the industry is doing quite well out of the Bill, which is producing huge amounts of paper. The regulations determine our participation in the paper market, and certainty is important. We need clarity, so that we can make progress on recycling and other things that we have started on. If our ability to work under directives is taken back to the UK Government, who do not share exactly our environmental ambitions or links to European markets, where does that leave Scotland?

There is uncertainty as well for local government. If we do not have the rules or the framework, can we just throw our waste in the street and the council is no longer obliged to collect it? Those things are underpinned by EU waste directives about the processing and treatment of waste, and without them there is no framework at all.

I want to speak briefly about where the power lies in another area. The hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson) and a couple of hon. Members who are no longer in their places mentioned food and food labelling, a lot of which is dealt with by the European Food Safety Authority. Of particular interest to me is the labelling and marketing of infant formula. I am fairly sure that the Scottish Government may wish to act to regulate infant formula further, but the UK, as has been evidenced in questions that I have raised on the issue, may not wish to do so.

The UK has long used EU law as a means to get around the full implementation of the international code of marketing of breast-milk substitutes. If we are no longer in the EU and we can set up the frameworks ourselves and make progress on the issue, why should the Scottish Government have to lag behind? Why should we have to wait while those powers are held at Westminster for an indeterminate length of time—it has been described as temporary and interim, but how long is it—we do not know—when we want to make progress on policies?

The hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) made a very good point about organ donation and presumed consent in that, when the Welsh Government had such powers, they made progress and had a good policy, which has led the way in the UK. In Scotland, we have had the smoking ban and other progressive health policies. If action on such policies is wrapped up in frameworks or EU directives, how can we be certain—in the context of clause 11 and of this Government not accepting any amendments that would give the devolved Administrations competence in these areas—that the devolved Administrations will be able to take the action we actually want to take, and how long will we have to wait for Westminster to give us back our powers?

Tommy Sheppard: I was going to reassure the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), who is no longer in the Chamber, that, given the lateness of the hour, I can do nothing other than be reasonable and mild mannered in my presentation. He seemed fearful that SNP Members would go berserk and worried that we were putting our case with too much passion. Let me try to put this as reasonably as I can.

I want to agree with Members who have talked about the positive cross-party nature of what is happening. There are three parties on the Opposition side of the House that differ quite significantly on our preferred constitutional outcome or endgame for Scotland, but we are united in trying to defend the gains of devolution that have been made during the past 20 years. Indeed, I think that some of the Scottish Tories might feel that way too, given the discussions we have had in the Scottish Affairs Committee. They seem too timorous to exercise that conviction by going through the Lobby with us tonight, but perhaps they will be persuaded in the fullness of time.

By way of context, we need to remember two things. One is how the interplay between the referendums of 2014 and 2016 in Scotland affects this debate. I was on the losing side in 2014—I lost the Scottish independence campaign—and I accept that result. However, it is important in understanding why Scotland voted to remain in the United Kingdom to look at some of the assurances that were given by the people who won that campaign, because that affects this debate. I am going to talk not about the obvious one, which is what was said about EU membership itself, but about two other things.

First, all parties that campaigned for a no vote in the 2014 referendum went out of their way to stress that there was no threat to the devolution settlement and that they would defend and extend it. The other assurance given was that should Scotland vote to remain in a political Union with England, Wales and Northern Ireland, this was not a matter of one country being subsumed into a much larger neighbour, but the creation of a partnership of equals—a multinational yet unitary state—with the views of Scotland therefore respected in any future debates. I am now calling to collect from this Government on both their respect for and commitment to devolution because, as far as I can see, the way in which clause 11 is currently written means that it recognises neither of those points. It is regrettable that at this relatively advanced stage of our discussions on the Bill, we still do not have any agreement whatsoever about some basic things.

The other factor we need to remember by way of context is of course the debate about devolution itself. I was heavily involved in the campaign that led to the creation of the Scottish Parliament, arguing for yes, yes in 1997. I was not in the House when Members debated the Bill that became the Scotland Act 1998, but I observed the proceedings and we can read the transcripts. We know that Parliament, led by the late Donald Dewar, clearly took a maximalist position. It basically said that everything should be devolved unless there was a case for its not being so, which is why the 1998 Act lists not the powers that are devolved, but the powers that are reserved.
If we had not been in the European Union when Parliament was debating the Act, how many of the 111 areas of responsibility would have been reserved and how many would have been devolved to the Scottish Government? The truth is that practically all of them would have been devolved without question, because there would have been no compelling case for reserving them. I think that people misunderstand the nature of the debate when they talk about the transfer of competences from the EU to the UK following Brexit.

Let us be quite clear that the reason why the European Union currently has some legislative competence in devolved areas is to ensure compliance with the treaty on European Union. That is what this is about. If Brexit goes ahead and we come out of the European Union, that, de facto, will not be required, so whatever the UK Government say about taking on these areas of competence, it will not be about complying with the terms of the treaty on European Union. The only thing it can be about, given that we already have a single economy in the United Kingdom, is convergence on policy. The transfer raises the possibility that we will move from compliance with international agreements to compliance with domestic policy. That is what I mean by a power grab, because it represents a severe potential constraint on the ability of the Scottish Parliament to legislate and act in its devolved areas.

Ministers will say, “That’s not the intention. This is a drop-off point for the powers so that we can then decide the best way for them to go to their final resting place.” I have to say to them that we are politicians, not psychics. We have to deal with what is written in the Bill that they have brought before us, not their intentions for what might happen as they go towards their endgame. What is written in the Bill is most clearly not what is being argued for by Ministers. If that were the case, we would have a schedule by now outlining which of the 111 powers can go straight to the devolved authorities on exit day, which of them definitely need to be reserved in the context of the 1998 Act, and which of them need further exploration through some sort of process, but we have heard nothing about a single one of them.

I say to Ministers that, even from a public relations point of view, would it not have been sensible to at least chuck a few of these powers the way of the devolved Administrations? No. 9 on the list is about blood safety. What is it about the Scottish health service and blood transfusion service that they do not trust? Why on earth would blood safety need to be reserved to the UK? Energy efficiency is another power on the list. Is it that a threat to an international trade agreement? How is that a threat to an international trade agreement? I say to Ministers that, even from a public relations point of view, why would blood safety need to be reserved to the UK? Is it that a threat to an international trade agreement? How is that a threat to an international trade agreement? Why would Ministers need to keep those powers? There are other examples that illustrate the ridiculousness of arguing that there should be even a temporary drop-off of these powers at Westminster. Such powers should clearly go to the devolved Administrations.

I am left wondering why this is being done. The obvious first answer is the phenomenal degree of administrative competence involved. I think Ministers have got themselves into a situation in which, because they have been incapable of producing a plan, they simply have no option but to say, “Trust us for now; we’ll do the best thing in the end.” It is very difficult for this Parliament to accept those assurances.

I think there is another red herring with the idea that a further reason why these powers need to be retained and examined further is that there might otherwise be interference with the United Kingdom’s ability to strut the post-Brexit globe in its ambition for “Empire 2.0”. There is a fearfulness that people in Scotland or Wales might act like the Wallonians and try to frustrate the creation of an international trade agreement. How ridiculous is that? Would it really matter if the Scottish Government introduced a policy that said, “We don’t wish to have genetically modified food in our food chain”? How is that a threat to an international trade agreement? All that would need to be done would be simply to specify that that was what people would need to deal with in Scotland, and that anybody wishing to sign the agreement would, quite reasonably, be able to do so.

The only way that that could become a threat to post-Brexit deals would be if there was a suggestion that the Scottish Government and the Welsh Assembly should take to themselves a power to veto a future UK international trade agreement, but no such power is being discussed. It is ridiculous that we should not now be discussing which powers are going where, rather than arguing that nothing can be done apart from a power grab by the Westminster Government.

Finally, the common frameworks that we need for these 111 areas are going to be entirely different, depending on the individual area. In some cases, it might just be a simple matter of agencies north and south of the border talking to each other and sharing best practice. There are probably very few areas that actually require a full-blown statutory regulatory framework across the United Kingdom.

Chris Skidmore indicated assent.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker) indicated assent.

Tommy Sheppard: The Ministers are nodding their heads. If that is the case, why have they not identified them? Why not bring forward proposals for dealing with the joint arrangements? I do not attribute malintent to those on the Government Front Bench, but there are people within the Conservative party—I see that the Scottish Tories have gone home—[Interruption.] I am sorry; they have left the hon. Member for Gordon (Colin Clark) as the lone representative. [Interruption.] Two of you! I withdraw the remark; only 80% of them have gone home.

Conservative Members talk about the process we are engaged in. We are engaged in a process of considering amendments to a Bill. I say to the Scottish Conservatives that they should think again about going through the Lobby with the Government tonight, because if they do so, they will all do the Government’s bidding, rather than putting pressure on them to come forward and make agreements and changes. If that happens, it will provide succour to those Conservative Members who never believed in devolution in the first place, and who will use Brexit as an opportunity to roll it back and take power to the centre.
Deidre Brock: I appreciate the opportunity to speak. I rise in support of amendments 72, 184 and 185. I am disappointed the Minister will not accept a single amendment or new clause tonight.

It is clear from the amendments that have been tabled, and from many speeches we have heard today, that there is general opposition among Members to the power grab in the Bill, even from people who aspire to be Whitehall Ministers and would wield that power if they did. I also think that the previous Prime Minister—the one who dragged us into this mess with his cunning plan of a referendum—would oppose it. His respect agenda did not run very far, but it did at least run. I urge the current crop of Ministers to aspire at least to clear that very low bar.

The Scottish Secretary has assured us on several occasions that powers repatriated from Brussels will be held at Westminster only temporarily. We could call that the “fluffy protocol”, or the political equivalent of “It’s only resting in my account, guv.” As yet, however, we have seen nothing to suggest there is anything coming down the road to confirm that that is guaranteed to happen. If that were the intention, surely the sensible, logical and easy thing to do would be to have a sunset clause in the Bill that would see the powers transferred to devolved Administrations timeously. Numerous experts, including witnesses to the Scottish Affairs Committee, on which I sit, have advocated that but, like several other things that should have been achieved, that has not happened.

The in-depth analyses of the effects of Brexit that were promised have not been delivered to the devolved Administrations. Some extremely superficial desk research was proffered as if it were the Rosetta stone, but the paucity of what has been delivered leads me to the inescapable conclusion that the Government have no idea what is or might be down the road, or what turns the road might be taking before we get there. The only certainty Ministers seem to have is that the map says “Here be no monsters”. Well, there are monsters, and they are in the Bill. The monsters are those that will damage devolution settlements with the tearing away of responsibility, power and resources from the devolved Administrations to be sucked into the abyss that is a Whitehall trying to deal with Brexit.

Judging by the confusion, bewilderment and disorientation that we have seen so far, just today, in fact, the aftershocks of Brexit are likely to keep hitting the UK—it’s economy, its international standing and its ability to attract immigrants—for decades. There are no indications that anyone in Whitehall will have the time, patience or inclination to run the rule over coming legislation to make sure that Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are properly considered. The devolved Administrations deserve the right to try to mitigate the deleterious effects of Brexit as much as is possible. I believe that the attitudes in each of those Administrations, including Stormont when it gets back on its feet, will differ from those here in great measure on a number of issues. My hon. Friends have already made significant reference to that issue. I appreciate that large swathes of England are about to get sideswiped by the effects of Brexit as well. They undoubtedly have cause for complaint, but I am here to speak for Scotland.

11.30 pm

It is clear from our debates of the past six months or so that there is a deep-seated misunderstanding about the issues affecting Scotland, and the same is true for Wales and Northern Ireland. Yes, that is a criticism of the Government, but I understand, actually, where this is coming from, as 17 million or so people live in the south-east of England, and population projections show that growing until everything is broken. I appreciate that ministerial attention will be focused there. Scotland does not get, and never will get, the ministerial attention from Whitehall that is needed to address its problems, so surely the sensible thing is to allow the Scottish Government to take care of Scotland and the Welsh Government to do the same in Wales. The Northern Ireland Executive can pick up the slack when they get back to work as well.

As I have pointed out in interventions, what concerns me most about the Bill is the executive power that can be wielded by an individual Whitehall Minister without reference to the devolved Administrations or anyone else with an interest in what is being done. Surely that works against the spirit of devolution. Amendment 72 would force that issue into the Bill and hang approval of the clause 11 process on a nod from Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast. Surely no democrat would oppose that. It will surprise no one to hear that my preference is for the powers over all these issues to go to Holyrood, where they can be wielded properly. My fear is that they will stop in Whitehall and atrophy to the point where those who want to use them can no longer find them.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock).

I rise to speak in support of new clause 64 and the Labour amendments that seek to address the sidelining of the devolved Administrations. Since devolution, over 17 years ago, there has been considerable divergence in many policy areas between the different parts of the UK. Environment and rural affairs policy has been significantly devolved, and this is one area where Brexit will have a huge impact. The day before the UK Government triggered article 50, the Welsh Government provided rural communities with a £250 million boost via the final tranche of the rural development fund to help them become more resilient after Brexit. We need this support to continue.

This evening, we have listened to the detail and intricacies of clause 11, the impact of which will have a detrimental effect on Wales, if powers come back to Westminster from Wales. I will take my speech in a different direction, however, so that I can highlight the needs of the farming community in Gower in the light of the new clauses and amendments. As we all know, there might not have been much truth in some of the claims made by the leave campaign, but many farmers had no reason to disbelieve politicians when they were told that “Wales would not be one penny worse off after Brexit” and that Welsh farming would have “at least as much support” as it currently has after Brexit, but we are yet to see any funding guarantee from the Government that will ensure that Welsh farmers get, at a minimum, the same level of funding support they currently receive through the common agricultural policy after 2020-21.
The Tory UK Government have refused to provide assurances about matching the current level of funding, but they have also failed clearly to explain what will happen about any future trade rules for farmers. The right hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) stated that NFU Cymru supported the retention of a common framework for agriculture, but decisions made in Westminster would most definitely not reflect the needs of the devolved nations, particularly of sheep farmers in Wales. There has been no mention, either, of how any support there is for farmers will be distributed between the devolved Administrations.

The Farmers’ Union of Wales supports the UK’s remaining in the single market and the customs union. The president of the FUW, Glyn Roberts, stated it was “the only sensible outcome” as much of the uncertainty about the future would just disappear. NFU Cymru has also stressed that access to the EU single market must be tariff free. We wait on tenterhooks for news from Brussels about whether a special deal can be struck for Northern Ireland, but as the First Minister, Carwyn Jones, said earlier, we cannot allow different parts of the UK to be treated more favourably than others. If Northern Ireland is to stay in the customs union and the single market, why cannot Welsh farmers profit from the benefits of remaining in them as well? They currently have a fantastic global reputation for quality produce, higher environmental standards and animal welfare protections. Wales needs to retain that strong brand, underpinned by high standards, but we have still not had any guarantees on how we can protect it.

It is more important than ever for Members of Parliament to engage with the farming community and the farming unions, which is something that I am proud to do. In my constituency, farming focuses on dairy, lamb and beef. I have met many farmers, and have discussed the post-Brexit situation with dairy farmer Andrew Stevens of Llannant Farm and with Dan Pritchard of Gower Salt Marsh Lamb. Dan has been involved in agricultural talks in Brussels, and says that the main concern for sheep farmers is uncertainty: because no one knows what is happening, it is impossible to plan for the future. Given that profits are already being squeezed for farmers, certainty about a future trade deal with the EU needs to be prioritised, or many more farmers will lose their businesses and stop farming. If Welsh farmers put their trust in the Tories, they will find themselves out of business.

The lamb, beef and dairy industry in Wales is subject to high standards of regulation, and we are proud of that. It ensures that produce from Wales and the United Kingdom is of the highest quality. Welfare should be a high priority, but the big issue for Welsh farmers is that Tory austerity means that people cannot afford to make better choices. Farmers will be unable to compete without either some sort of protection or some assistance to export so that we can continue to sell our goods in the EU and to other countries. Given the threat of tariffs and the risk of losing subsidies, the farming industry in Wales is feeling vulnerable. There must be public procurement in which the produce from our Welsh farms has priority. Our schools, hospitals and armed forces should be using British produce, including produce from Wales.

During my discussion with Dan from Gower Salt Marsh Lamb, he identified one positive aspect of our leaving the EU: the possibility that other markets could be tapped into. However, while farmers hope that that may happen, the prospect of a tariff on their current trade with France, the EU’s largest importer of lamb, makes future business inconceivable. The fact that such huge changes are on the horizon means that leaving the EU is an uphill battle for Welsh farmers. The message from farming unions in Wales is clear, and the message from the Welsh Government is clear: the UK Government must maintain current levels of investment in farming in Wales after Brexit, to ensure that Welsh farmers remain competitive and can produce food of the highest standards.

I support new clause 64 because it would establish collaborative procedures for the creation of UK-wide frameworks only if Ministers “have consulted with, and secured the agreement of, the affected devolved administrations”, such as Wales.

Drew Hendry: We have heard a great deal about clause 11 tonight. My right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) described it correctly earlier, and even Conservative Members representing Scottish constituencies admitted that it was faulty in its current form. Indeed, it is nothing more than a power grab which is fatally undermining the devolution settlement in all the nations of the United Kingdom.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and London) (SNP): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way so early in his speech. I do not know whether he has seen the coverage of last week’s rural broadband debate, during which Scottish Tory Members shouted across the Chamber, “Strip the Scottish Government of their powers.” That is their attitude. There is no doubt that there is a power grab at stake.

Drew Hendry: My hon. Friend has made a good point. It is important for us to be aware that there are forces that would like power to be taken away from Scotland.

Clause 11 was drafted by people with no understanding of devolution law. It is a midden in its current form. There are questions about the mechanisms that will result from it. Surely, if the Prime Minister’s “union of equals” statement is correct, frameworks should be agreed, not imposed. If, as the Minister said earlier, this is a temporary situation, why should it not lie with the Scottish Government to take that power temporarily until the frameworks are agreed? Our amendment 72 ensures that the devolved legislature would give consent to those appropriate areas in clause 11 before it comes into effect.

As we have heard, the fact that there are 111 powers demonstrates the scourch of the issues at stake. As things stand, however, UK Ministers could simply make changes to important policy areas without the formal consent of the Scottish Government or the Welsh Government, or the Scottish Parliament or the Welsh Assembly.

We are told to trust that a deal will be done—that we can expect this to happen—but I think people were expecting something to happen today, yet that deal did
not happen. How can we have confidence that things will be done and a deal will be delivered when Arlene Foster can just pick up the phone and say, “No, we don’t like that”?

There are 111 areas covering a massive range of Scottish life: fishing, farming, law, data sharing, aircraft noise, pesticides, fracking, flooding, water quality, food, forestry, organs, blood safety—as my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) pointed out earlier—land use, railways, renewables and victims’ rights.

It is clear that those at the top of the profession in legal circles believe clause 11 is drafted without an understanding of devolution law. As Professor Alan Page put it:

“Not only does the Bill propose a massive increase in the power of UK Ministers to legislate in the devolved areas, it also proposes that their exercise should not be subject to any form of Scottish parliamentary oversight or control. What is proposed therefore is a law-making system fundamentally at odds with two of the key principles on which the devolution settlement is based.”

He was not the only one. Professor Rick Rawlings noted:

“The sooner clause 11 of the Withdrawal Bill is cast aside, the better. Constitutionally maladroit, it warps the dialogue about the role and place of the domestic market concept post-Brexit.”

On clause 11, even the Law Society of England and Wales has called for discussions about where the common frameworks will remain and their scrutiny. Professor Alan Page said that “the real purpose of Clause 11 is not to secure legal continuity but to strip the devolved institutions of any bargaining power that they might have when it comes to the discussion of common frameworks and all the rest.”

We welcome the fact that there will be discussion over devolved areas of responsibility; consultation, however, does not satisfy the needs of devolution, and the UK Government should seek consent from the Scottish Government before exercising delegated powers in devolved areas, and the same goes for Wales and Northern Ireland. People’s jobs, businesses and farms, their environment at sea, in the air, above ground and below ground, virtual lives and literal lives, justice we depend on, and even the blood in our veins: tonight we must vote to uphold the rights of people across the nations and ensure that power is not taken from them.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I begin by echoing the words of my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), because clause 11 is an unashamed power grab; it is undermining the devolution settlement, and it drives a coach and horses through devolution across these islands. In the time that I have to speak, I will talk about the impact it will have on farming, particularly in my Argyll and Bute community.

It is generally accepted that Scottish farmers, particularly farmers and crofters working the land on the west coast, face vastly different challenges from farmers in the rest of the UK. Not only do Scottish hill farmers toil with some of the poorest land, but they face additional challenges from climate, geography and topography, and so much so that 85% of Scottish agricultural land is classed “a less favoured area” compared with just 17% of English agricultural land.

Given that Scottish farmers face specific challenges, surely it stands to reason that they need a bespoke solution that recognises the vast differences that exist across these islands. It is understandable that the Scottish Government and the Scottish farming community are demanding confirmation that all powers relating to agriculture post-Brexit will automatically be passed to the relevant legislature—in this case, the Scottish Parliament. I fear that this Government are taking us down a dangerous road. They are deliberately proposing fundamentally to alter the basic principles of devolution.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): The hon. Gentleman has mentioned the word “road”, which prompts me to intervene on him. When the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) and I—and indeed the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara)—drive to the west, we see big signs telling us that the road was built with the assistance of the EU. One of the biggest questions in the minds of my constituents is: what will replace that funding stream? This relates to the ability of farmers and crofters to access their beasts.

Brendan O’Hara: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. This is why my constituency, his constituency and the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber all voted to remain in the European Union. As things stand, all the powers connected to agriculture will go to London post-Brexit. It will be London that decides what happens.

Ian Blackford: My hon. Friend is making a first-class contribution to the debate. I declare an interest as a crofter. Is it not the case that the UK Government have form on this? When they were given convergence uplift money in 2013, there was a distinct intention that 86% of those funds should come to Scotland, yet they have given us only 16%. The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, who is sitting on the Front Bench, made sure that Scotland did not get what it should have done. We have been short-changed by Westminster. It is little surprise that we do not trust Westminster to look after us in this regard.

Brendan O’Hara: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention. I will touch on that issue in a moment.

Let us be clear that this is not just an SNP argument. The National Farmers Union of Scotland has made it absolutely clear that any move to impose what it describes as “DEFRA-centric policy” is completely unacceptable to Scotland. I agree wholeheartedly with the union when it states:

“The Scottish Government must retain the ability to manage, support and implement schemes, policies and regulations as it currently does.”

If the UK Government are serious about protecting Scottish agriculture, I suggest they listen to the president of the NFUS, Andrew McCorrick, who has made it clear that the union’s priorities include securing friction-free trade, access to skilled labour and a support package specifically designed for Scotland. He was absolutely spot-on when he said that maintaining access to the single market and the customs union was essential for Scotland’s farmers. On today of all days, if a deal can be found for one part of the United Kingdom to remain in
the single market, there can be no other reason than political pig-headedness that such a deal cannot be found for Scotland.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that, if immigration powers were to be devolved to the Scottish Parliament, that would allow us to make provisions for agricultural workers? That was proposed by the Environment Secretary, who is on the Government Front Bench at the moment.

11.45 pm

Brendan O’Hara: I could not have put that better myself. My hon. Friend is absolutely correct.

We have heard much today from the hon. Members for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) and for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) about trust. They said that we should trust the UK Government to do the right by the Scottish farming community, but why would the Scottish farming community trust this Government to do the right thing? This is a Government who shamelessly robbed the Scottish farming community of the convergence uplift, and I doubt that that community will ever trust them again. The Government have to recognise the hugely important part that the Scottish farming community plays, economically and socially, in our lives. It is a vital component of our rural economy. It keeps the land productive and, in many cases, it is members of that community who keep the lights on in the glens of Argyll and the west highlands. I fear that London and Whitehall do not understand that community.

In conclusion, Brexit is a huge challenge for the Scottish farming community. Without a deal on agriculture that does not return legislative competence from Brussels to the Scottish Parliament, Brexit poses an existential threat to Scotland’s farming communities and will be a disaster. Tonight is the first real test of whether the Scottish Conservatives, who are wrong on a whole host of issues, actually put Scotland’s interests first; or are they, as many suspect, simply the Conservative party on manoeuvres in Scotland? They know that, if they choose to vote with the Government tonight and let the Bill go unamended, the result will be catastrophic for Scottish farming. What comes first: their loyalty to the captain or their constituents? It keeps the land productive and, in many cases, it is members of that community who keep the lights on in the glens of Argyll and the west highlands. I fear that London and Whitehall do not understand that community.

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Association’s planning and environmental manager, and Professor Carolyn Roberts, vice-president of the Institution of Environmental Sciences, both appeared before the Environmental Audit Committee. When I asked them about marine protection zones, Emma Barton said:

“As far as I am concerned we have had a …positive experience in Scotland… I don’t have any particular concerns…in Scotland.”

When I asked Professor Roberts about the possible post-Brexit danger that devolved Administrations would be forced to take things they do not want, such as genetically modified crops or fracking, her answer was yes. Again, I pressed her on whether these powers could be taken back, and she said, yes, of course they could.

The complexity of working out exactly what the devolved Administrations can and cannot do will mean that every legal decision they make in areas touched by European legislation will be open to challenge at UK level. Effectively, this could turn them into paper Parliaments whose decisions could be overturned by anyone with the resources to launch a case at the UK Supreme Court. The Scottish Government agree that common frameworks are needed to guide many legislative areas across the UK post-Brexit, but the frameworks need to be agreed, not imposed.

My last quote is from the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, who was sitting in the Chamber earlier. He has said that he had his own “Damascus moment” on environmental issues, which I welcome, but he raised eyebrows at the EAC in November with his answers on devolved matters. He promised to clarify his position, which he has done by way of a letter to the Committee. Or has he? The letter said:

“In particular, we will explore with the devolved administrations whether they wish to take a different or similar approach. We have been clear throughout that we respect the devolution settlements, that we expect more powers to be devolved and that no decisions which the devolved administrations currently make will be taken from them.”

Consider that. I repeat it:

“no decisions which the devolved administrations currently make will be taken from them.”

Post-Brexit, will the Government honour the Environment Secretary’s statement and make the temporary position permanent?

Jenny Chapman: After eight hours of debate, during which I lost count of the number of contributions, I do not think I heard a single speaker on either side say that there was not an issue with clause 11. The Minister seems to accept that it has some deficiency, yet after eight hours he will not say what he thinks it is or how he intends to remedy it. He has not seen fit to accept a single amendment or new clause put before him today, despite saying he welcomes reasonable, practical contributions. For that reason, I shall seek to put new clause 64 and amendment 42 to the vote.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The Committee divided: Ayes 256, Noes 313.

Division No. 53 [11.59 pm]

**AYES**

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<td>Flynn, Paul</td>
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<td>Martin, Sandy</td>
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<td>Maskell, Rachael</td>
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<td>Furniss, Gill</td>
<td>Matheson, Christian</td>
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<td>Gaffney, Hugh</td>
<td>McCarthy, Kerry</td>
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<td>Gapes, Mike</td>
<td>McDonagh, Siobhain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gardiner, Barry</td>
<td>McDonald, Andy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Benyon, rh Richard
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorran, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Layla
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Norris, Alex
Onasanya, Fiona
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Oswin, Kate
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Teresa
Pennock-McCaw, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Piddock, Laura
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powells, John
Qureshi, Yasmin
Hashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rodda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra

NOES

Afzali, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Sparrow, rh John
Starmer, rh Keir
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Streeting, Wes
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Tami, Mark
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umuna, Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
Watson, Tom
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Vicky Foxcroft and Colleen Fletcher

Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracy
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Dowle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Elwood, rh Mr Tobias
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evnett, rh David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fysh, rh Mr Marcus
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmit, Zac
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damien
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Halfon, rh Robert
Halls, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holloboone, Mr Philip
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jennick, Robert
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddington, rh Mr David
Clause 11
Retaining EU restrictions in devolution legislation etc.

Amendment proposed: 42, in page 7, line 16, leave out subsections (1) to (3) and insert—

'(1) In section 29(2)(d) of the Scotland Act 1998 (no competence for Scottish Parliament to legislate incompatibly with EU law), omit “or with EU law”.

(2) In section 108A(2)(c) of the Government of Wales Act 2006 (no competence for National Assembly for Wales to legislate incompatibly with EU law), omit “or with EU law”.

(3) In section 6(2)(d) of the Northern Ireland Act (no competence for the Assembly to legislate incompatibly with EU law), omit “is incompatible with EU law”.

This amendment removes the Bill’s proposed restrictions on the ability of the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales and the Northern Ireland Assembly to legislate on devolved matters.

Question put. That the amendment be made.

The Committee divided: Ayes 292, Noes 316.

Division No. 54] [12.14 am

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniacci, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chapman, Douglas
Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Lambos
Cherry, Joanna
Clwyd, rh Ann

Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Crawley, Angela
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Craddes, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Davey, rh Sir Edward
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martyn
De Cordova, Marsha
De Piero, Gloria
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tammanjeet Singh
Docherthy-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliot, Julie
Elman, Mrs Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Fovargue, Yvonne
Frith, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Geithins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Mr Mark
Hendry, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hermon, Lady
Hill, Mike
Hiller, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollem, Kate
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Killen, Gerard
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Lee, Ms Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Linden, David
Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Geema
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mcl Nally, John
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhan
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Norris, Alex
O’Hara, Brendan
O’Hara, Brendan
Onasanya, Fiona
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Piccod, Laura
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rodda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruan, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Starmer, rh Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Streeting, Wes
Sweetney, Mr Paul
Tami, Mark
Thewiss, Alison

Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Bolles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Breerton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenbrow, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Buhragh, Alex
Bums, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Caims, rh Alan
Campbell, Mr Gregory

Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timm, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Twick, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
Watson, Tom
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Wishart, Pete
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes: Vicky Foxcroft and Colleen Fletcher

NOES

Cartledge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Dochez, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Downen, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
(c) The Northern Ireland Assembly has passed a resolution approving the provisions in subsection (3).”—[Ian Blackford.]
The Committee divided: Ayes 290, Noes 316.

Division No. 55

AYES

[12.30 am]

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abbathams, Debbie
Alexander, Heidi
Aili, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Bradyshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Caabour, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chapman, Douglas
Chapman, Jenny
Charlambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Cixey, rd Ann
Coaker, Vernon
 Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rd Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Coye, Neil
Crawley, Angela
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Craddes, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, rh Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Daviey, rh Sir Edward
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martyn
De Cordova, Marsha
Dehassain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Gerald
Jonees, Graham P.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Kevin
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afsal
Killer, Gerard
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Lee, Ms Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Steward Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
Mears, Ian
Milliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Norris, Alex
O’Hara, Brendan
Onasanya, Fiona
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Pickock, Laura
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rodd, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruang, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Ryan, rh Joanne
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Starmer, rh Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Streeting, Wes
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Tami, Mark
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Karl
Twiggy, Derek
Twiggy, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
Watson, Tom
West, Catherine
Tellers for the Ayes:
Drew Hendry and
David Linden

NOES

Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
That clause 11 stand part of the Bill; and of the Bill), single stand part question.

Under Standing Order No. 83D(4), I must now put the that schedule 3 be the Third schedule to the Bill.

The Committee divided: Ayes 315, Noes 290.

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):

Question accordingly negatived.

The Committee divided: Ayes 315, Noes 290.

Division No. 56] [12.45 am

AYES

Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allen, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Berestovskiy, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brereton, Jack
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glynn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Dinenage, Caroline
Djohney, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dod, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Downen, Oliver
Dray, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Elwood, rh Mr Tobias
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evenett, rh David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazier, Lucy
Freeman, George
Frey, Mike
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nasrata
Gibb, rh Nick
Gilian, rh Mrs Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Hafon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harker, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinske, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Philip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Levis, rh Dr Julian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
MacInlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, 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, Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Prith
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Philp, Chris
Pincher, Christopher
Pon, Barbara
Prest, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Dominic
Redwood, rh Mr John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Setlow, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, rh Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Soubry, rh Anna
Speelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spenlow, rh Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Stundy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Tohursh, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shaihesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, Sammy
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Nigel Adams and
David Rutley

Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chapman, Douglas
Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Chwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Crawley, Angela
Creagh, Mary
Cresasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, rh Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Davey, rh Sir Edward
David, Wayne
Davies, Gerard
Day, Martyn
De Cordova, Marsha
De Piero, Gloria
Debonaire, Thangam
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dockerty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrell, Paul
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Fint, rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Fovargue, Yvonne
Frith, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Groghan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Mr Mark
Hendry, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hermon, Lady
Hill, Mike
Hiller, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollern, Kate
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Killen, Gerard
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Lee, Ms Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
The occupant of the Chair left the Chair to report progress and ask leave to sit again (Programme Order, 11 September).

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.

Progress reported; Committee to sit again tomorrow.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 2 to 7 together.

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

ROAD TRAFFIC

That the draft Community Drivers' Hours Offences (Enforcement) Regulations 2017, which were laid before this House on 14 September, be approved.

JUDICIAL APPOINTMENTS AND DISCIPLINE

That the draft Selection of the President of Welsh Tribunals Regulations 2017, which were laid before this House on 14 September, be approved.

PETROLEUM

That the draft Scotland Act 2016 (Onshore Petroleum) (Consequential Amendments) Regulations 2017, which were laid before this House on 19 July, be approved.

PENSIONS

That the draft Pension Schemes Act 2015 (Transitional Provisions and Appropriate Independent Advice) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations 2017, which were laid before this House on 10 July, be approved.

FINANCIAL AND MARKETS

That the draft Risk Transformation Regulations 2017, which were laid before this House on 14 October, be approved.

INTERNATIONAL IMMUNITIES AND PRIVILEGES

That the draft Unified Patent Court (Immunities and Privileges) Order 2017, which was laid before this House on 26 June, be approved.—(Craig Whittaker.)

Question agreed to.

COMMITTEES

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 8 to 12 together.

Ordered,

ENVIRONMENTAL AUDIT

That Colin Clark and Glyn Davies be members of the Environmental Audit Committee.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

That Jo Platt be a member of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee.

HOME AFFAIRS

That Esther McVey be discharged from the Home Affairs Committee and Douglas Ross be added.
INTERNATIONAL TRADE
That Keith Vaz be discharged from the International Trade Committee and Stephanie Peacock be added.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY
That Stephanie Peacock be discharged from the Science and Technology Committee and Carol Monaghan be added.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Selection Committee.)

PETITION
Chicken Farm, Rushden, Northamptonshire

12.59 am

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I am grateful to all the Members who have come along to listen to the petition, particularly my hon. Friend for Corby (Tom Pursglove), whose constituency is also affected by this dreadful proposal for a factory-style American chicken farm in Higham and Rushden. As a result of this outrageous proposal, 540,000 chickens will be slaughtered every 39 days. The lead petitioners are Councillor David Jenney, Roger Barnes and Councillor Peter Tomas, and 7,002 people have signed the petition.

It states:
To the Honourable the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in Parliament assembled,
The Humble Petition of residents of Rushden, Northamptonshire and the surrounding area,
Sweethen,
That the Petitioners believe that the proposed Bedfordia Farms planning application for a high intensity chicken farm be refused on the grounds of increased pollution, foul odour, effect on local house prices, increased traffic volume; and further that similar farms have a poor record on animal welfare.
Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your Honourable House urges the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Department for Communities and Local Government, Northamptonshire County Council and East Northamptonshire Council to take in account the concerns of petitioners and refuse to grant the planning application for a high intensity chicken farm to Bedfordia farms.
And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray, &c.

Universal Credit Sanctions

11 am

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I thank those Members who are staying to listen to the debate. I realise that it is very late at night, but this is an important issue that affects many people—far more than we would want to be affected. Ideally, we would not be having the debate. We hoped that by now the Government would have listened to the calls for the universal credit programme to be paused so that they could learn lessons, take stock of where we are, and fix an arrangement that ought to be providing a decent service and simplifying the benefits system.

After the great war, William Beveridge declared that there were five giants on the road to reconstruction: poverty, disease, ignorance, squalor and idleness. To tackle those five giants, a new, radical response was needed—a response big enough to meet head on the challenges of the day that risked Britain’s future. Furthermore, Beveridge set a vision for a new settlement between the rights of citizens, the role of the Government, and the formation and foundation of public services. It was a balance of roles and responsibilities, rights and obligations, and an expectation that if Britain was to succeed, there must be investment in its foundations.

The challenges that face Britain today, although different, are as big. Our economy is weak and reliant on low wages, low skills and insecure employment. We might sweeten the bitter reality by making it sound cutting-edge—by calling it the gig economy rather than exploitation—or by affixing power to the workers when in fact many of them are powerless, but at its heart is a weak foundation of exploitation and low value that fails to respect a basic belief on which I was raised: a fair day’s wage for a fair day’s work.

Why is this important? It is important because people should be able to earn enough to live—not just to get by, but to be comfortable and enjoy life: to have a nice meal, a holiday, a reliable car, a decent, secure home and a healthy family, and, crucially, to live in a country that invests to ensure that the next generation does even better than the one that went before. We should have a society in which fairness runs through everything we do. There should be a balanced contribution, with equal dividends for those who pay their fair share.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the new sanctions in the universal credit system punish the working poor, especially low-paid workers?

Jim McMahon: The evidence says that—it says that working families are worse off under universal credit, and not because of its technocratic elements, but because the Government made a deliberate decision to make sure the financial crisis would be borne by those who could least afford it. They are people who are going out to work and doing what is asked of them but, as hard as they try, they cannot make ends meet because the odds are stacked against them and the Government are not on their side. That is what people in Oldham tell me, and that is what people in Oldham feel when they work very long hours and do not see the reward from doing that.
Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way at this late hour of the day, or this early hour of the morning—whatever it might be.

The issues that the hon. Gentleman is describing are United Kingdom-wide. A report from the Central England Law Centre shows that UC sanctions are three times greater than other sanctions. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that is a worrying trend that affects all constituencies throughout the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Jim McMahon: That is an important intervention. The Department for Work and Pensions’ own error statistics show that the error lies within the DWP. In 2016-17, claimant error was 1.8% and official error was 4.9%. When claimants are doing what is asked, the margin of error is marginal, so it is the official errors that are sending people into severe debt and often poverty, and, all too often, to the food bank.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. It is about a different aspect of UC from what we have discussed before, which is refreshing. Does he agree that reports produced by the likes of Oxford and Liverpool Universities on the links between benefit sanctions and the use of food banks prove that there is a major issue regarding the DWP’s sanction regime forcing people into food poverty?

Jim McMahon: That is what is cruel about this. The working classes are taught that if they are willing to roll their sleeves up, work hard and put the hours in, they can get by, and that if they work really hard, their son or daughter will have a better life than they had, and that legacy can be passed on to their children. I see a lot of people in Oldham who are doing what is asked of them and working long hours, but the idea that they will do better than their parents, and that their children will do better than them, is a distant prospect. That is cruel.

We are still one of the richest countries in the world, but we are a country that is built on very weak foundations. I fear what Brexit means for our country because of how fragile our economy is and how little investment has been made in the foundation of rebuilding our economy, whether in skills, the types of industry that will get us beyond Brexit, housing or public services. All those things matter, and I do not see investment being made in places where it ought to be. This is a very sad situation.

Reflecting on my own situation, when my son was born, we relied on working families tax credits. That helped us, because it meant we were not just eating cheap microwave meals or skipping meals entirely to pay the rent, but it also meant that for the first time we were part of the welfare state. We were always taught that we claim benefits only when in absolutely dire need of them, not because there is a shame necessarily attached to claiming them, but because they are to be treasured. We were taught that we must not abuse them, but that they are a safety net to catch us when we need it. That is why we pay our national insurance and that is why we value benefits.

I worked for 40 hours a week, but it still was not enough, especially when large or unexpected bills arrived. It was a tough lesson to me that sometimes it does not matter how hard people work, because if they get caught in a cycle of debt, it can be difficult to break out of that trap. It only takes one or two minor things going wrong, such as a household bill coming in unexpectedly, for things to become very difficult.

The situation also showed me that sometimes the machinery of government is not on our side. We were in debt not because of unexpected bills, but because an error in the calculation of our family tax credits sent us into an overpayment situation.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): It has been worth staying in the Chamber for this important debate. My constituency, like that of my hon. Friend, has been a pathfinder for universal credit for some time. It is those bits of absurdity that I find so hard to take. Government errors are resulting in people being sanctioned. I have seen people sanctioned for attending a job interview, which they are mandated to do. They win such cases on appeal, but that can often take two or three weeks, and the sanction leaves them dependent on high-cost credit or food banks to get by. They become trapped in a spiral of despair, and I find that bit of the system absolutely unconscionable.

Jim McMahon: That was my experience. We were working long hours and we relied on tax credits to be able to pay the rent and put food on the table. Through no fault of our own, we were trapped in a system that put blame and responsibility on to our shoulders, even though the fault was eventually proven to be that of the system. Families experience a great deal of stress when they do not have the necessary disposable income to satisfy all the demands that are coming in. That is the extremely difficult experience of people who are on universal credit.

I was in a secure job with a regular wage, and my hours were not changing all the time. I would fear being a universal credit claimant today if I were in insecure employment where my hours changed from one week to the next, where my employer would not give me certainty of employment or, even worse, where my employer would put me on a zero-hours or self-employed contract and I had to declare my earnings up front just in case there was an error further down the line. That does not strike me as a system that has been designed to help the claimant. It seems to have been designed to create a culture, and I believe that it is a corrosive culture. It is not a safety net to catch people, or a top-up benefit system that is meant to make work pay. It is a culture that talks about the deserving poor. It tells people that they are poor because of their own fecklessness or laziness, or as a matter of choice, not because they have been caught in a cycle of debt and despair. There also seems to be a grudging idea of what the welfare state is meant to be. People are told, “All right, we’ll pay you the money if we have to, but only if we really have to.” The culture that that creates is very dangerous for a country that has a long history of a welfare state.

More than 1 million working families will be £2,800 worse off under universal credit. Food banks have reported a 30% increase in referrals in areas with full universal credit roll-out. I want to talk about Greater Manchester, and particularly about Oldham. I want to take this opportunity to pay tribute to my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), for the leadership that she has shown on this issue. She will know from her
constituency the depths of despair that people reach and the problems with the system, but some of these issues can be resolved, provided that the Government step back and listen to these concerns and take enough time to fix them, instead of going full steam ahead into a programme that they know has been built to fail.

We were one of the first pilot authorities, and we now have 4,000 claimants in Oldham. There are 49,000 claimants across Greater Manchester, nearly 20,000 of whom are in work. We have seen delays, mistakes and IT failures, on top of the deliberate decision by the Government to cut payments for those claimants who need them the most. Those things have real consequences. We have heard from Citizens Advice, the Greater Manchester law centre, my own local authority and directly from people working in job centres across Greater Manchester. We have also heard from a wide range of charities, including the Oldham food bank, which have seen scores of people—often referred by the Department for Work and Pensions itself—queueing for food vouchers for the food banks, just to get a basic supply to be able to live. My casework advisers are swamped and so are many of the charities. We fear the roll-out to the full 322,000 legacy benefit claimants, not for ourselves, but because we see what the scale of human suffering will be if the Government continue to fail to heed the warnings that the system is broken.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is particularly worrying that the sanctions regime is to be rolled out to people who are already in work? As he says, they are often in insecure work with varying hours, which will leave them open to benefit sanctions for reasons beyond their control.

Jim McMahon: That is important, because concerns have been raised about when people are underemployed and do not have enough hours for a full-time week and the Government require them to actively pursue work to make up the additional hours. They may be only one or two hours under the threshold, but they are still required to attend an interview. If they work for an employer that has no flexibility and would be happy for them to walk out the door, because there is a queue of 10 people who are willing to take the 35-hour-a-week job, perhaps they cannot get to the appointment or perhaps the employer will not give them the additional hours required to satisfy the jobcentre. That is a real example of what people are going through today.

In a recent survey, Citizens Advice found that 39% of people had waited for more than six weeks and 11% had waited for more than 10 weeks. We have a heard a lot about the need for welfare to mirror work. It ought to provide a smooth transition between employment, changing contract terms and earnings, and significant changes in circumstances, but at its heart it is part of the welfare state. It is a safety net to catch people when they fall on difficult times that helps them to keep their head above water. It is meant to help people, not treat them as undeserving or with suspicion and resentment. For a safety net to work, it must be there when people fall. It should not let people hit the ground hard and then make them wait six or 10 weeks before help arrives. That is not the spirit of a welfare state that people pay into through national insurance. It is an insurance policy, but it fails to be there when people need it. That is fundamental.

There is a contract in place between citizens and the state. If we collectively, through our common endeavour, pay national insurance contributions, that fund ought to be there when we need it. The Government have failed to honour that contract, as far as I can see, and people who pay into that pot have the right to be disgruntled and to question whether it is really there. I would like to believe that that is not what the Government want, but some of the benefits debates in the media are corrosive. We hear the language that gets used by the Government. We are now in a position where the Government would be happy for public support for the welfare state to fall away completely to give them a reason to take the axe even further.

When the banking crisis really hit, people in Oldham did not blame the bankers or the Government; they blamed their neighbours. They looked at the neighbour who had a slightly nicer car than them and wondered why they could not have a nicer car. They saw the people with their suitcases full who were getting into a taxi to go on holiday and asked why they could not go on holiday. That is the cruelty. People on low incomes were set against other people on low incomes, and the Government got away with it. When bankers have not been sanctioned and corporation tax cuts have been handed out, the axe has been taken to the welfare state that was supposed to support people.

Thirty per cent. of people have reported making more than 10 calls to the universal credit helpline before their application was processed, with many waiting more than 30 minutes. Up until very recently, they were also charged a high premium. Some 57% had to borrow money while waiting for their first payment. So far, 101 job centres covering 14% of all job centres in Great Britain operate universal credit full service, and we fear for what the roll-out really means. But this is more fundamental than all the facts and figures. I talked about how we collectively pay into the pot that should be there to support people, and I could go into a lot of detail about the sanctioning regime and just how unfair and inflexible it is and how it does not take people’s lives into account.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on the passion and conviction with which he is speaking on this hugely important issue at such an early hour. Does he share my concern that the report released this morning by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation highlighting that pensioners, children and many families are, as a result of benefits sanctions, falling further into poverty despite much progress having been made? Does he also agree that, as Brexit starts to bite and as these sanctions come into place, we are approaching a catastrophe for those on low incomes?

Jim McMahon: That is absolutely the experience of people who have been affected, including people who are far away from the job market. The treatment of people who are in work on low wages and in insecure employment is wrong, but we should have a welfare state that supports people into employment, and it just does not do that in the way we want. Universal credit might force people into a job regardless of what the job is and regardless of its suitability, and it does not take into account people’s real desire to make an active contribution and to feel that their life is going somewhere. That is the real cruelty of the current system.
According to the DWP’s own data, Greater Manchester saw a staggering 34,000 sanctions in the 12 months to June 2017, with 3,420 of those sanctions in Oldham alone. Unsurprisingly, December 2016 saw sanction rates hit their peak at 4,200, which is hardly surprising given that the Christmas period knocks appointments out of sync, meaning that people might not be able to attend.

My plea, and it has been made a number of times, is that if we believe in the foundations of a fair society, we have to have rights and obligations, but we also have to have a state that recognises it has a role to play. The foundations cannot be taken for granted. When they were brought in, they were brought in because the country was in a state and we recognised that something dramatic had to happen to build the type of Britain we want. The idea that those brave decisions can be undone by a Government who seem completely indifferent to human suffering is worrying.

More than that, the challenge our country faces as we embark on leaving the European Union is one of the biggest in generations. It could cause economic shock and social shock, and we do not quite know yet what the consequences will be. A person might think that the Government would take this opportunity to re-establish their vision for the type of Britain that will exist after Brexit. Core to that has to be decent public services, a social security system that is there when people need it, and an employment system in which we invest in industry and social shock, and we do not quite know yet what the consequences will be. A person might think that the Government would take this opportunity to re-establish their vision for the type of Britain that will exist after Brexit. Core to that has to be decent public services, a social security system that is there when people need it, and an employment system in which we invest in industry and make sure that the next generation has the chance, which has unfortunately been taken away from too many, to do better, get on in life and have a decent life living in this country.

The Government need to step up. Time is ticking. Generations are passing by. I do not want the current system for my children, and nobody in this House should want it for their children or for their constituents, either.

1.22 am

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): Time is a little short, but I will seek to address as much of what the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) raised as possible. I congratulate him on securing this important debate.

I will start by going over some of the principles of why we have conditionality and of how the system we have specifically designed in universal credit supports claimants in meeting conditionality. The hon. Gentleman went over some of the history of our benefit support system and, yes, the system is there to provide a safety net, but it is also a well-understood and long-standing principle that individuals must meet certain conditions to receive certain benefits.

It is possible, of course, to argue for a system of out-of-work support that does not have conditionality—something like a universal basic income—but that is not, to the best of my knowledge, the policy of the official Opposition or of other Opposition parties in this House. That would be a completely different debate.

Conditionality has been a long-standing feature of welfare benefit entitlements in this country, and the scope and scale of it has evolved over time. The introduction of jobseeker’s allowance in 1996 intensified the monitoring of unemployed claimants’ job seeking behaviour, and the incoming Labour Government of 1997 adopted what was called a work-first and work-for-all approach that embraced JSA’s monitoring of claimants’ job search activities, backed up by benefits sanctions in cases of non-compliance. Universal Credit is specifically designed so that work coaches engage with and support people early in their claim, and then throughout, to give them advice and support, and not to lose contact with them. With the introduction of the claimant commitment, it is clear to claimants what is expected of them. Through it, they commit to undertake certain actions, such as attending interviews, applying for jobs and apprenticeships, or going on training, in exchange for receiving benefits.

Ruth George: Does the Minister believe it is correct that a single parent of a 13-year-old child should have to sign up to a claimant commitment to seek work for 35 hours a week when they have a child to look after in the school holidays?

Damian Hinds: The claimant commitment is agreed between the claimant and the work coach, and it is based on the claimant’s particular circumstances. So where a mother is taking young children to school and back, the time she would have available to work and for work search would be restricted by that. Where someone has caring responsibilities for a spouse, parent or disabled child, that will also change the amount of time they have available. The point is that this is to be a tailored system that responds to and reflects the individual’s circumstances. The individual and the work coach between them agree what is reasonable, and the claimant then commits to it. As I was saying, work coaches have the flexibility to personalise the requirements—I have pretty much covered what I was about to say in that paragraph in responding to the hon. Lady.

Work coaches can also remove all work-related requirements where it is not reasonable to expect claimants to be able to comply, or suspend them temporarily, such as when someone needs time to find a home. We are constantly reviewing our guidance and ensuring that work coaches understand the importance of getting the right levels of conditionality in place, based on a claimant’s individual circumstances. Indeed, when a work coach takes up the role for the first time, they go through a minimum of five weeks of classroom-based learning, after which they consolidate that learning back in their jobcentre. This training covers conditionality and setting appropriate commitments for the specific circumstances of the claimant. Additionally, when a jobcentre goes live with the universal credit full service, existing work coaches there go through three weeks of classroom learning, which also includes how to apply conditionality and agree reasonable commitments. Similarly, work coaches can refer to extensive guidance on how to support claimants with disabilities and complex needs.

It is right that there is a system in place to encourage claimants to meet their requirements and, as a result, move closer to work. As such, if a claimant does not meet the requirements they have agreed to in their claimant commitment, they are referred to a decision maker to determine whether a sanction is appropriate. We take a number of steps to make sure our decisions are fair: the decision maker invites those referred for a sanction to explain why they failed to meet their requirements; and
we take the claimant’s individual circumstances into account, including any health conditions or disabilities, and any evidence of good reason, before making a decision to apply a sanction.

Evidence from trials where there was no conditionality for the first 13 weeks showed a significant increase in the length of time spent on benefit. That was due mainly to people taking longer to find work. In addition, more than seven tenths of UC claimants said the potential for sanctions made them more likely to look for work or take steps to prepare for work.

A report from the OECD in 2013 also noted that the UK’s

"long tradition of activation policies to promote the effective reintegration into employment of working age benefit recipients helped limit the rise in unemployment, even during the global and financial crisis".

When a claimant disagrees with a sanction, they can ask for the decision to be reconsidered. Following that, if necessary, they can appeal against the decision to an independent tribunal. Ultimately, where a sanction is applied, it can only deduct an amount equal to the claimant’s personal element of universal credit—that is, their standard allowance. It does not apply to the additional amounts they may receive in respect of having children, to cover housing costs or to help with the costs of disability.

We have a well-established system of hardship payments and, in universal credit, claimants are able to apply for a hardship payment from the time their payments are reduced through a sanction. Nevertheless, most claimants do what is expected of them and are not sanctioned. The latest published statistics show that at March 2017, 6.9% of people on universal credit had a deduction taken from their standard allowance as a result of a sanction.

The rate in universal credit is higher than the sanction rate for jobseeker’s allowance, but the two are not directly comparable. In UC, if a claimant fails to attend a work-focused interview without good reason they can be sanctioned, whereas if a claimant on JSA fails to attend a work-focused interview, after five days without making contact they would have their claim terminated. In the November statistics release, about two in every 10 adverse sanction decisions are for failing to attend, whereas under UC it is about seven in every 10. To repeat, it cannot be inferred from that that more people are not attending. Rather, it means that non-attendance is often treated differently because UC is a very different benefit that covers not just the individual element, but support for children, housing costs and other elements.

Universal credit is designed to support claimants in a holistic way, ensuring that we help them find or progress in work, while ensuring that they continue to receive help with their housing costs and other benefits. In universal credit, we are more likely to temporarily reduce benefit, for example where there is a complete loss of claimant contact, while we try everything possible to contact the individual. In jobseeker’s allowance—

1.31 am

House adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 9(7)).
The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[MRSpeaker in the Chair]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

REPORT OF THE MACUR REVIEW

Resolved,
That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, That she will be graciously pleased to give directions that there be laid before this House a Return of parts of a Paper, entitled The Report of the Macur Review (Revised Redacted Version): An independent review of the Tribunal of Inquiry into the abuse of children in care in the former county council areas of Gwynedd and Clwyd in North Wales since 1974, dated 5 December 2017.—[Mike Freer.]

Oral Answers to Questions

JUSTICE

The Secretary of State was asked—
Leaving the EU: UK Legal System

1. Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): What steps the Government plan to take to ensure the effective operation of the UK legal system after the UK leaves the EU.

[902740]

17. Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): What steps the Government plan to take to ensure the effective operation of the UK legal system after the UK leaves the EU.

[902756]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Dominic Raab): The Government have made it a top priority to ensure that there is a smooth legal transition, both in our negotiations with the EU and as a matter for our domestic implementing legislation.

Damien Moore: What steps will the Department take once we have left the EU to secure a review and possible reversal of European Court of Justice rulings that are affecting British companies and citizens?

Dominic Raab: We are taking back control over our laws—that is what the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill does—so that hon. Members in this House are properly accountable to the voters and the UK Supreme Court has the last word on the law of the land. From that point on, we can retain, revise or repeal any piece of retained law as we see fit for the British national interest.

Robert Jenrick: The Minister may have seen the recent TheCityUK report, which underlined the importance of the legal sector to the United Kingdom’s economy and the City. Will the Minister update the House on the negotiations in respect of the report’s principal concern, which is whether contracts will continue to be enforceable and respected across the European Union after we leave?

Dominic Raab: In our negotiations with the EU, we have made it clear—for example, in our position paper on civil and judicial co-operation—that we want to maintain that win-win co-operation in areas such as recognition of contractual judgments, but also on decisions in family law disputes that support businesses and individuals on all sides.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister get out and meet more people in the justice system? I have been talking to judges, barristers and campaigners who are all terrified about what will happen to our justice system if we leave the European Union. Who is he talking to, and why does he not broaden his circle?

Dominic Raab: May I gently suggest that the hon. Gentleman does not engage in such scaremongering? I have been talking to practitioners, legal groups and the judiciary. We have set out our plans in our position paper, and I would have thought that he would welcome that. Through the EU (Withdrawal) Bill, which I hope he will support, we will make sure that we have a smooth legal transition.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Will the Minister confirm to the House that it is his policy that the European Court of Human Rights will still have jurisdiction over Britain after we leave the EU?

Dominic Raab: The right hon. Gentleman will know, because it was in our manifesto and it has been repeated since, that we have no plans to withdraw from the European convention on human rights or the Strasbourg Court.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Does the Minister agree that we had a very effective legal system before we joined the EU, and we will have a very effective one for many years after we leave?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is right. Of course, I take very seriously the concerns of those who think we need to mitigate the risks, and that is what our negotiations and the EU (Withdrawal) Bill will do. We also have a huge opportunity to promote UK legal services on a global level through trade liberalisation and by promoting the UK as a hub for international dispute settlement. We should grasp the opportunities as well as managing the risks.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Last month—just two weeks ago—while the House debated the EU (Withdrawal) Bill, the Prime Minister’s spokesman told journalists that the Government expect the role of the European Court of Justice to remain unchanged during an implementation period of two years after the Brexit date in March 2019. Will the Minister confirm to the House that that means that it will not be possible to bring into force large parts of the EU (Withdrawal Bill), including the repeal of the European Communities Act 1972, until the end of the implementation period?
Dominic Raab: The position is set out in the EU (Withdrawal) Bill, and the hon. and learned Lady will know from Committee debates that we have made it very clear that we are not going to pre-empt or prejudice the outcome of the negotiations on either the withdrawal agreement or the implementation period.

Joanna Cherry: Last week “Sky News” reported that the Government wish to stay in the European Aviation Safety Agency after Brexit and accept that that will mean remaining under the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice, because it is the ultimate arbiter of EASA rulings. Will the Minister now confirm that this means the Prime Minister’s red line of no ECJ jurisdiction after Brexit has been shown to be utterly and completely untenable?

Dominic Raab: I am afraid that the hon. and learned Lady is relying yet again on second-hand reports via the media. We will not pre-empt or prejudice the outcome of negotiations on the partnership deal, and I hope that she will support us in getting the very best deal for that sector and for the UK as a whole.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) has an exactly similar question. I would have called him if he were standing, but he was not, so I did not, but if he does, I will. No? The hon. Gentleman does not wish to do so. So be it; it is his choice.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Can the Minister confirm that elements of our civil and criminal law go back to Magna Carta in 1215 and earlier, that our legal system is far more long established than any EU legal system in the world and that, as far as future laws in this country are concerned, Brexit holds no fears for us?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have a rather different legal system, through our common law, and we have variations across the UK, but I think that we should have the courage of our convictions and confidence in our democracy. When it comes to the judiciary, of course, we want the UK Supreme Court to have the last word on the laws of the land.

Legal Aid

2. Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of proceeding with litigants in person, and how much that would cost? Does he actually know how many cases are being settled and not going through the courts, because of the cost and the trauma for those involved. The LASPO review provides an opportunity to look at all of this in the round, but I do not think that the answer will be exclusively about money; it will also be about the positive incentives that we put in place.

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): It is estimated that providing early legal help in family court cases would cost less than £14 million because, as the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) has just said, many cases would be resolved before getting to court. Why does the Minister continue to insist that this is not a cost-effective way of dealing with cases? Does he actually know how many cases are proceeding with litigants in person, and how much that is costing the courts system?

Dominic Raab: There is a range of support for early legal help, as I have already detailed—£100 million of support—and that can be online or telephone support, but also representation. Since 2015 we have invested £5 million in the litigants in person strategy. There is a range of support available, but of course we can review this in the round through the review.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): We are a nation of laws, but we must be one nation too, with access to justice for people from all backgrounds. Does my hon. Friend agree that, post the LASPO review, the most careful thought should be given to bolstering legal aid resources so that we can have early advice and assistance for all?
**Dominic Raab:** My hon. Friend, as usual, makes a powerful point. We will be able to look at this in the round, but we do still spend £1.6 billion on legal aid, which is a quarter of my Department’s budget. If we want to put more resources in, the money has to be found elsewhere. We will also be looking carefully at making sure we have the right allocation to support those in the greatest need.

**John Cryer** (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Was not the founding principle of legal aid full and free access to justice regardless of ability to pay? Has not that principle been eviscerated and ripped up by the Government, with the able assistance of Nick Clegg and his little Liberals?

**Dominic Raab:** The hon. Gentleman makes his point in his usual punchy way, but I have already detailed the support for early legal help and set out some of the support for litigants in person. The fact is that we provide £1.6 billion in legal aid. If we look at Council of Europe comparisons—I know that we cannot compare like with like exactly—we see that we are providing more legal aid per capita than any other Council of Europe country.

**Richard Burgon** (Leeds East) (Lab): We have heard from the Law Society and the president of the Supreme Court on early legal help, which Labour’s manifesto also backs. My hon. Friends have asked questions about this and the Minister has said that the evidence is not there. I want to help the Minister, so will he show today that he is not driven purely by ideology and agree to a simple thing: to commission independent research into the savings that can come from early legal help to inform the Government’s legal aid review before it reports back next summer? Will he do it?

**Dominic Raab:** We have got the review in place. We will take a wide range of advice and set up expert panels to ensure that we get the proper and best advice. The hon. Gentleman should feel free to contribute. However, his proposals would add £400 million to the cost, and he needs to explain where the money would come from because it does not just grow on trees.

**Victims and Witnesses: Court Experience**

3. **Amanda Milling** (Cannock Chase) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve the court experience for victims and witnesses.

13. **Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): What steps he is taking to improve the court experience for victims and witnesses.

**The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Dominic Raab):** We are investing more than £1 billion in our court reform programme to make our justice system more sensitive to victims and witnesses and more accessible to the average citizen.

**Amanda Milling:** It is almost a year since I met Jill Saward, who sadly passed away at the beginning of this year. Jill was a tireless campaigner for victims of rape and sexual assault and she led the campaign that brought an end to accused rapists cross-examining victims. Will my hon. Friend outline what progress is being made to extend the law to protect victims of domestic violence during trials in family courts?

**Dominic Raab:** I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the way in which she has championed this issue and to Jill Saward for her campaigning work. As part of our reform programme, we are rolling out section 28 pre-recorded cross-examination for vulnerable witnesses in the Crown courts. That will be rolled out initially in Leeds, Liverpool and Kingston upon Thames from next year, but the plan is for a national roll-out. We are also committed to extending section 28 to family law cases and we have announced legislation for that purpose in the Queen’s Speech.

**Jim Shannon:** The Minister is right that the victims should be central to Government policy. What support is available for both adult and child rape victims after the verdict, and will he outline the process whereby support is offered, regardless of the verdict?

**Dominic Raab:** In 2017-18, the Ministry of Justice allocated around £7 million as a contribution to 97 rape support centres across England and Wales to provide independent specialist support. In the same year, we allocated £68 million to police and crime commissioners. The hon. Gentleman raised an important aspect of the support, which remains available to victims after as well as before the conclusion of a trial, regardless of the verdict.

**Angela Smith** (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): The Minister just said that legislation relating to this matter was outlined in the Queen’s Speech. We are particularly concerned about domestic violence victims in the family courts. When will that legislation be introduced on the Floor of the House?

**Dominic Raab:** The announcement was made in the Queen’s Speech. We are looking at the parliamentary timetable and we will be able to say something about that shortly.

**Liz Saville Roberts** (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Perpetrators of domestic violence can currently commit abuse of process by bringing vexatious court actions against their victims, often cross-examining them in person in civil and family courts. Will the Minister consider introducing legislation on that? When will he do it?

**Dominic Raab:** As I have just said, the legislation was announced in the Queen’s Speech. Obviously, we have a packed parliamentary timetable at the moment, with the EU measure and other aspects of that, but we are committed to introducing legislation and we will announce details soon.

**Peter Kyle** (Hove) (Lab): Earlier this year, the Secretary of State generously agreed to amend the Courts legislation and introduce primary legislation to outlaw the cross-examination of victims by domestic abuse perpetrators. The principle of using primary legislation to tackle the matter has been agreed. When will he introduce primary legislation to tackle the issue?
Dominic Raab: As I have already made clear in two answers, we are committed to not only the courts Bill, but that specific reform. I look forward to the full-throated support of the hon. Gentleman and other Opposition Members.

Reoffending Rates: Custom House Building

4. Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): What recent assessment has he made of the potential effect of self-build and custom house building on reducing prisoner reoffending rates.

Mr Gyimah: Of course we want to reduce reoffending. The presumption in this country is against prison. It is up to the judiciary to sentence how they see fit. We want to make sure that there are appropriate interventions in the community and we are looking at that.

Litigants in Person

5. Afsal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking in response to recent trends in the number of people who represent themselves in court.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah): The Government’s litigants in person support strategy provides a range of practical support and information to those without legal representation before the courts.

Afsal Khan: Senior judges are warning that the growing number of litigants in person is creating a huge burden on judges, lawyers and the litigants themselves. Will the Minister commit to restoring legal aid to the family courts, where this problem is most serious, as Labour has promised to do?

Dominic Raab: We have the LASPO review, which I have described. If I may, I will take this opportunity to point out that since 2015 we have invested £5 million in the litigant in person support strategy, which includes practical support such as: online and self-help resources, access to free or affordable legal advice, and, where possible, legal representation.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): Representing themselves in court has been a real issue for domestic violence victims. Restoring legal aid is welcome, but that will not happen until January. I note the Justice Secretary is advertising for a second speechwriter at a rate of £70,000. As there is cash to spare, will he commit to ensuring that domestic violence victims who seek legal aid, as of yesterday’s announcement, will be able to claim retrospectively under the new criteria?

Dominic Raab: We will be laying the statutory instrument shortly and I think, beneath the political point-scoring, the hon. Lady welcomed it. It will make it easier to apply for legal aid in family cases where there has been a victim of domestic abuse. More broadly, wider personal support units provide trained volunteers who give free independent assistance to people facing proceedings in the family sphere and beyond. There are 20 centres in 16 cities. I hope she would welcome that.
6. Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): What assessment has he made of the effect of the recent pay award on the recruitment and retention of prison officers.  

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Lidington): The Prison Service pay review body recommendations, which I accepted in full, were implemented in the October and November pay of officers. It is therefore too early to assess the effect of this particular award, but I can report to the House that at the end of September this year total prison officer numbers were up by more than 1,200 full-time equivalent staff compared with the previous 12-month period.

Liz Twist: Given that the leave rate among key prison officers in bands 3 to 5 is still running at 10%, does the Secretary of State not think it time to offer prison officers more than the 1.7% they have been offered in order to retain experienced prison staff and keep our prisons safe?

Mr Lidington: For those prisons, mostly in London and south-east England, experiencing particular challenges over both recruitment and retention, we are offering additional support and resources. I would have hoped, however, that the hon. Lady would have welcomed the significant increase in prison officer numbers over the last year. The prison officer pay recommendations were implemented in full, and prison officers received a pay rise of 1.7%. In terms of the total bill, that is more than was awarded to other public sector workers.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the effect of the recent pay award on the recruitment and retention of prison officers.

Mr Lidington: Prison officers certainly are working under very challenging conditions, not least because of how organised crime is promoting traffic in new psychoactive substances across prison walls, but we believe that not just the increase in numbers but the shift, in forthcoming months, to the new offender management model, under which each officer will take responsibility for about half a dozen named offenders, will contribute to increased morale.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): One in four prisons have seen a reduction in the number of prison officers over the past year, including a quarter of prisons the Government label as being of concern, so given their so-called recruitment drive, will the Secretary of State guarantee today that no prison, apart from those planned for closure, will have fewer staff at the end of the year than they did at the beginning?

Mr Lidington: As I said in response to the last question, the new offender management model, which we are implementing throughout the system, will reduce the pressure on individual prison officers. Where a particular prison has greater than average difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff, we will continue to put in extra resource and support to help them.

Prisoner Rehabilitation: Sporting Activities

7. Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effect of prisoners participating in sporting activities on improving rehabilitation rates.

Dr Lee: Team sports promote the values of hard work, accountability and team work. Does the Minister agree that these are exactly the values we should seek to instil in offenders, particularly young offenders, to cut the risk of reoffending and give them a better chance in life after release?

Dr Lee: Yes, I do. I hope that every Member would agree. I have commissioned Professor Rosie Meek of Royal Holloway to compile a report on the impact of sport on offenders in custody and in the community so that I can get a complete picture of what I think are the positive benefits. I look forward to her report being published in the new year.

Sir Edward Leigh: What is the purpose of prison? Is it punishment or rehabilitation?

Dr Lee: The purpose of prison is to play its part in reducing crime. That is the fundamental challenge that our Department and the Home Office face, and I believe that sports clubs can play a part. For example, the Saracens project with Feltham young offenders institution has a recidivism rate in its small pilot of about 10%, which compares very favourably to the overall rate.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): As well as sport, does the Minister agree that arts and crafts could also play a part in the rehabilitation of offenders? Prisoners in Hull Prison were involved in creating a replica of Jason, Amy Johnson’s plane, for city of culture year. It is now in Hull Paragon train station. Unfortunately, the Ministry of Justice seems to want to move it to York. Will he look at that again and keep it in Hull to recognise what the prisoners have done?

Dr Lee rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady has raised an ingenious point, which is at best tangentially related to the question on the Order Paper—rather as one might say that Hull is tangentially related to York, both of them being in the north of England. Given that she has been so ingenious, however, let us hear the Minister and find out whether he is comparably dexterous.

Dr Lee: Thank you for the opportunity, Mr Speaker.
I agree with the hon. Lady that it is not exclusively sport that can make an impact on the lives of young offenders in particular. I remember visiting Cookham Wood Prison and being overwhelmed by the quality of the artwork that was being undertaken there.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Prisoner wellbeing and rehabilitation at HMP Nottingham continues to be of major concern after five people died there in four weeks. When I raised the issue at the last justice questions, the Prisons Minister, the hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah), echoed my concern and undertook to write to me. May I ask whether Ministers are still concerned about HMP Nottingham, and when I will receive that letter?

Dr Lee: If the hon. Gentleman would like to write to me about the matter, it would be very helpful.

Alex Norris: Write another letter?

Dr Lee: The matter is not specifically in my brief, because HMP Nottingham is not a young offender institution.

Prison Governors

8. Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): What steps he is taking to empower prison governors. [902747]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Lidington): In April this year, governors were given authority to devise the daily routine in prisons—the way in which they organise staff—and to have a greater say in the health services received by prisoners. In October, governors gained control of the new family services budget, and next year we will devolve the prison education, careers advice and libraries budget to governors in England.

Craig Mackinlay: That is enormously helpful. Does my right hon. Friend agree that governors know their prisons and their prisoners best, and that many of the day-to-day operational decisions about such matters as the core regime, education and training are best devolved down from Governments into their local hands?

Mr Lidington: Yes, I do agree. I think it important for Ministers and officials in the Prison Service to trust the professionalism of governors who are in charge of individual establishments, which is why, as national contracts for particular services expire—for example, maintenance, repairs and food procurement contracts—we will seek opportunities to devolve them to establishment level.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The Secretary of State will have noted that comments made by chief inspector of prisons about one of his reform prisons are quoted in today’s edition of The Times under the headline “‘Trailblazing’ jail is swamped with drugs”. The prison is said to have deteriorated over the last 12 months. I am genuinely interested to know whether the Lord Chancellor can tell us who is responsible for that—the governor, the head of the prison and probation service, Michael Spurr, or the Lord Chancellor himself.

Mr Lidington: Ultimately, I am responsible for the Department and the services that it provides. As is the case with every inspection report, the Prison Service will take action to remedy the problems identified by the chief inspector, and a new scanner to detect drugs has already been installed at Holme House.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. There are plenty of other questions on prisons, to one of which we now come.

Prisons: Drones

9. Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): What steps he is taking to prevent the use of drones over prisons.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah): The organised criminals who use drones to smuggle drugs and phones are a major threat to the stability and safety of our prisons. We are taking decisive steps to tackle that threat through joint intelligence-led operations with law enforcement agencies to identify and disrupt the individuals involved.

Luke Hall: What more can be done to harness the power of intelligence-led work to track drones, not just to stop them coming into prisons but to find the criminals who are seeking to use them to disrupt our prison system?

Mr Gyimah: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the importance of not just stopping contraband coming into prisons, but stopping the organised crime networks that are behind that. The specialist staff in our regional and national intelligence teams are transforming the way in which we work with the police to that end. We have launched Operation Trenton, in which a specialist team of police and Prison Service investigators will work together to intercept drones and track down the criminals behind them. So far there have been at least 17 convictions related to drone activity, and those convicted are serving about 50 years in prison.

Prisons: Mobile Telephones

10. Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): What steps he is taking to prevent the use of mobile telephones in prisons.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah): Illicit phones erode the barrier that prison walls used to place between prisoners and the community. They can be used to harass victims and to support the trade in contraband that, as we know, drives violence and self-harm. We are working with law enforcement partners to identify and disrupt the organised crime networks that supply phones and other illicit items to prisons. For example, our recent joint operation at HMP Hewell recovered 323 items, including 79 mobiles and a large quantity of drugs.

Stephen Metcalfe: Does my hon. Friend agree that we must be constantly alert to the potential for new technology to deter, detect and disrupt the illicit use of mobile phones in prisons? Does he therefore welcome the potential...
offered by the private Member’s Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), which received its Second Reading last week and which will help to block mobile phone signals around prisons?

Mr Gyimah: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The consequence of illicit items in prisons is violence and instability for the regime, and the way to counter that technological threat is through technology. The private Member’s Bill promoted by my hon. Friend for Lewes, which the Government are backing, would give us more power to switch off mobile phones in prisons and therefore deal with the scourge that they present.

Prison Officers: Safety

12. Mrs Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con): What progress has he made on improving safety for prison officers.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Lidington): In addition to strengthening the frontline by boosting prison officer numbers, we are using intelligence-led searches and joint operations with law enforcement agencies to disrupt the supply of drugs, phones and other illicit items that drive violence in prisons. We have invested in 5,600 body-worn cameras to help to protect prison staff, and we are working with the police and the Crown Prosecution Service to prosecute prisoners who assault officers.

Mrs Badenoch: On a visit to Rochester prison last Thursday, I heard that perceptions of prison officer safety were affecting recruitment. Can the Secretary of State tell us what the Department is doing to support the recruitment of prison officers?

Mr Lidington: We are meeting with considerable success in filling the 2,500 additional prison officer places that my predecessor, the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), successfully negotiated a year ago. We are also developing a graduate entry scheme for prison officers, and working with the armed forces to ensure that the service leavers scheme takes proper account of the opportunities in the prison service.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): The hon. Member for Saffron Walden (Mrs Badenoch) makes an important point about how the perception of safety can affect recruitment and retention in the prison service. Will the Secretary of State give me an update on the Government’s workforce strategy for all justice sector staff—safety issues affect everyone in the sector—and commit today to involving all trade union stakeholders in the development of that workforce strategy?

Mr Lidington: The right hon. Lady makes a good point. Within Government, we continue to discuss how we might look at changes and reforms to the way in which the prison and probation workforces are structured, but irrespective of those discussions, we are proceeding with measures to give additional support to prison governors and prison officers by boosting regional management teams and trying to ensure that professional development is taken seriously at all ranks of the prison service.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): The reality of life in our prisons is one of inexperienced prison officers dealing with more violent and dangerous situations on a daily basis, and that is a direct result of this Government’s cutting 7,000 prison officers. They have now slammed that into reverse to recruit 2,500 officers, as has been announced today. There are prison officers in the Gallery today who are visiting on a lobby with the Prison Officers Association. Will he agree to meet them to discuss prison officer safety?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend the Prisons Minister and I meet representatives of the Prison Officers Association both at national level and whenever we go to visit prisons, where we make a point of talking directly to staff and listening to their concerns. I believe that, as well as recruiting additional officers as promised, we need to ensure that anybody who attacks a prison officer is properly prosecuted, where there is good evidence available. That is what ought to happen, and I hope that the police and the Crown Prosecution Service will work with us to ensure that we get those outcomes.

Female Offender Management

15. Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve the management of female offenders in the criminal justice system.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Dr Phillip Lee): We are investing over £1 million between 2016 and 2020 to support local areas in developing multi-agency approaches to female offenders. We also developing a strategy for female offenders to improve outcomes for women in the community and in custody.

Helen Whately: East Sutton Park Prison in my constituency does a fantastic job in helping women offenders prepare for life after prison, and I look forward to welcoming my hon. Friend to the prison in the new year. What are he and the Government doing to help women across the country prepare to make a fresh start on leaving prison?

Dr Lee: I look forward to visiting East Sutton Park with my hon. Friend in the new year. It has an excellent record of building strong links with both national and local employers such as Timpson, Sainsbury’s and Specsavers. We want to develop and spread such relationships across the country, because people who have a job on leaving prison are less likely to reoffend.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): It is 10 years since the Corston report. Can the Minister update us on the progress the Government are making in meeting all 43 of Baroness Corston’s recommendations, in particular funding for specialist units such as Eden House in Bristol?

Dr Lee: The Corston report was the very first document I read on being made the relevant Minister in July 2016, and it is a very good document. Since then I have worked tirelessly, along with my officials, to develop a women’s strategy that goes some way to meeting the challenges set by Baroness Corston. I recently met the Corston funding group to discuss the proposals that we will bring forward when the strategy is published.
Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): As female offenders are more likely than male offenders to have caring responsibilities for children, what role does the Minister think prison governors should play in maintaining and strengthening family ties?

Dr Lee: In my travels around the country, every governor of a women’s prison I have met knows the importance of maintaining good family links. In the strategy, we have this in our minds in developing an infrastructure for the future, whereby women are held as close a possible to their families, if they have to be locked up.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): What action are the Government taking to reduce the incidence of breach and recall, which is leading to an increase in the women’s prison population?

Dr Lee: We are aware of the challenges around recall, and some of this is to do with the fact that women go back out into the community and into exactly the same situation they were in before going into prison. This is being considered in depth, and our approach to it will be part of the women’s strategy.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The Minister will know that a disproportionate number of women are sentenced to very short prison terms, and judging by his previous statement he probably shares the view that they are generally ineffective in breaking the cycle of reoffending. Will the Government think seriously about adopting the Scottish system, under which short sentences have to be actively justified by the court before they are passed?

Dr Lee: We already have a presumption against custody in our system in England. I acknowledge, however, that Scotland is embarking upon an exciting path in managing its women offenders, which is why I am going there on Thursday.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): Given that half of all women in prison are there just for a few weeks, does the Minister agree that we can achieve a better outcome for the women themselves, and reduce the number of victims of crime, if we invest in women’s centres, rather than sending non-violent women to prison?

Dr Lee: When visiting prisons and meeting prisoners, what is striking is that many of them have been victims themselves. I am very conscious of that, and the strategy will try to deal with it through the way in which we handle and manage women who have committed offences.

Exceptional Case Funding Scheme

16. Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): What plans has he to review the criteria for the exceptional case funding scheme for coroners’ inquests involving multiple deaths to ensure that close family members have legal representation.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Dominic Raab): We are looking at ways to make inquests more sensitive to the needs of bereaved families. The Lord Chancellor will update the guidance on exceptional case funding by the end of the year, and we will also look at this issue as part of the wider LASPO—Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012—review.

Tim Loughton: My hon. Friend will be aware that I raised the case of the Shoreham air show crash with the Prime Minister at questions a month ago. The Legal Aid Agency has refused exceptional case funding to the families of the victims. Can it be right that the families of the victims of an event that at the time resulted in the largest civilian loss of life since 7/7 might be the only ones not to have legal representation at the coroners’ inquest next year, not least when there is a wider public interest for the over 2 million people who attend 300-plus civilian air shows each year?

Dominic Raab: My deepest sympathies go to the victims of the Shoreham airshow disaster. My hon. Friend knows that I cannot comment on individual decisions, but I can say that we have protected early legal advice for inquests within the scope of legal aid, and there is an opportunity to look at the issue more broadly as part of the LASPO review. Legal aid is decided independently, but it was granted in over half of cases where inquest applications were made last year.

Youth Custody: Physical Restraint

18. Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): What recent assessment has he made of the suitability of physical restraint techniques used in children in youth custody.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Dr Phillip Lee): We are clear that restraint should be used only when it is absolutely necessary and when no other form of intervention is possible or appropriate. The number of incidents in which restraint was used reduced by 11% between the year ending March 2015 and the year ending March 2016.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: In September, I asked why the Ministry of Justice’s approved methods for restraining children in young offender institutions and secure training centres can actually kill children or leave them disabled. I have since received a letter from the Minister stating that pain-inducing restraint techniques may be necessary in limited circumstances. The Department of Health launched a consultation last week about children in the care of the state, on the premise that restraint should not be used to punish or with the intention of inflicting pain, suffering or humiliation. What exactly is the Government’s position on restraint?

Dr Lee: The restraint techniques that are used were developed in consultation with a medical panel and a medical adviser—[Interruption.] I must emphasise to the hon. Lady that we are dealing with sometimes quite violent individuals. Violence levels in the youth estate are 10 times that in the adult estate, and decisions are sometimes made, however difficult, to protect the individual concerned, other children in the unit and the staff.

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady continues to chunter from a sedentary position in evident disapproval of the thrust of the reply provided from the Treasury Bench, but the hon. Lady has a recourse: she can apply
for an Adjournment debate and dilate on such matters at greater length, which I am sure will be of great satisfaction to her and, possibly, to others.

**Court System: Modernisation**

19. **David Morris** (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): What steps he is taking to modernise the court system. [902758]

20. **Tom Tugendhat** (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): What steps he is taking to modernise the court system. [902759]

24. **Robert Courts** (Witney) (Con): What steps he is taking to modernise the court system. [902763]

**The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice**

(Mr David Lidington): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer Question 19 together with Questions 20 and 24. We are investing £1 billion in the modernisation of Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service. This summer, we launched the first online courts pilots, covering divorce, social security and civil money claims. In October, I visited the Manchester civil justice centre and saw some of that work first hand.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. The right hon. Gentleman had not asked in advance for my agreement to the grouping, but I am nevertheless happy to provide it. Presumably, the request was not made to my office on account of the expectation that we would not get this far, but Ministers ought to know better by now; we do tend to make quite quick progress. We will take supplementary questions from those who are here—I think at least one is not.

**David Morris:** Part of the problem with the courts system is that the lay person does not understand the jargon. Will my right hon. Friend examine how we can improve communication within the system so that the ordinary man on the street can understand what is going on in court proceedings?

**Mr Lidington:** I apologise to you, Mr Speaker, if there was a mess-up in communications with your office.

In response to my hon. Friend, as we test and pilot the online court proposals it is important to ensure that the process is stripped of legal jargon so that our constituents—men and women who may have no particular knowledge or experience of the technicalities of law—are able easily to understand, follow and use the process.

**Tom Tugendhat:** As co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on public legal education and pro bono, I was wondering whether my right hon. Friend had made any assessment of how the online process will save many people who go to small claims courts from unnecessary stress and hassle when all they are often trying to do is resolve a simple money claim.

**Mr Lidington:** Having tried out the small money claims process, my view is that it provides a user-friendly way for a consumer to seek redress from somebody against whom they have a claim. So far, more than 3,000 people have used the pilots that I have described, and they have received straightforward digital access to our courts.

**Jim McMahon** (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I wrote to the Government in October to ask about the impact of the closure of Oldham magistrates court and county court, but they said they do not collect data on non-attendance. How on earth can the Government know about the impact of closures if they do not collect that data?

**Mr Lidington:** When a proposal is made to close any court centre there is a public consultation, which enables representations to be made and evidence to be looked at seriously. Such a consultation is always accompanied by an analysis of the travel times, both by car and by public transport, for people who use the court centre scheduled for closure to attend the proposed alternative. These things are considered in detail.

**Lucy Powell** (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): In the context of court modernisation, will the Secretary of State look at making the courts more transparent, particularly by allowing defendants and those who have been sentenced to get court transcripts and copies of the judge’s direction to the jury? Especially in cases of potential miscarriage of justice, it can be incredibly difficult to get that information.

**Mr Lidington:** I would like to take away and reflect on the serious points made by the hon. Lady. Obviously the conduct of a trial in court is a matter for the trial judge, but I will look seriously at the issue and write to her when I have had the chance to take advice on the matter.

**Topical Questions**

T1. [902765] **Mike Amesbury** (Weaver Vale) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice**

(Mr David Lidington): Since the last Justice questions I have introduced a new urgent notification process, which allows the chief inspector of prisons formally and publicly to notify me, as Secretary of State, where he judges that urgent action is required to improve a prison with significant problems. This new procedure will require a joint response from Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service and my Department to ensure that decisive action is taken to address immediate concerns, and we will demonstrate our commitment to transparency by publishing both the chief inspector's notification letter and my response within 28 days.

**Mike Amesbury:** I am sure the Secretary of State will join me in condemning the shocking and senseless attack on a police community support officer in my constituency. The PCSO was reportedly deliberately lured into some woods before being attacked with a knife. Will the Secretary of State agree to meet me and other relevant partners to discuss what more the Government can do to ensure that our justice system properly reflects the gravity of such serious crimes?
Mr Lidington: I am sure the hon. Gentleman will appreciate that it would be wrong for me to comment in detail on an individual case when it is a matter of investigation and, conceivably, a trial. In general terms, the Government are committed to ensuring that the law protects those dedicated, professional public servants, including PCSOs, who do their utmost to keep us safe. That is why the Government are supporting the Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Bill, introduced by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), to give such greater protection.

T2. [902766] Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): What does my right hon. Friend think can be done to make sure that community sentences are not just robust and effective but are seen as such?

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Dominic Raab): My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have a range of robust community sentence options, which can include the whole range from unpaid work and curfews to rehab programmes and treatment for mental health and substances misuse problems. We are working with the judges and magistrates, and with the national probation service, to make sure community sentences are as operationally strong as they can be and can command public confidence.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I have repeatedly asked the Secretary of State how many staff have been axed since probation was privatised, and I have repeatedly been refused an answer. It is now being reported in the press that there was a 20% cut in the number of probation staff in the privatised community rehabilitation companies between 2015 and 2016. Can he confirm that CRC staff have been cut by a fifth?

Mr Lidington: It is for individual community rehabilitation companies to take decisions about the staffing and what kind of staff they need to deliver on their contractual obligations to the Government. The Government’s responsibility is for staff in the national probation service, and we are recruiting additional staff to it.

T6. [902770] Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Given that a rise in fraudulent claims can push up the cost of insurance for all, what assessment has the Minister made of the levels of holiday sickness insurance claims and the impact of false claims on the cost for honest holidaymakers?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend raises a good point. The Association of British Travel Agents reported a sixfold increase in gastric illness claims against tour operators between 2013 and 2016, but reports in resorts of illness were declining. This cost operators about £64 million in the youth custody reform programme, which includes better training for staff.

Mr Lidington: Given that the youth population is way too high, and I have taken measures to address it. Part of that has been investing £64 million in the youth custody reform programme, which includes better training for staff.

T7. [902771] Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend advise me as to what steps are being taken to reduce reoffending levels among young people in the west midlands, including in my constituency?

Dr Lee: The current rate of reoffending among the youth population is way too high, and I have taken measures to address it. Part of that has been investing £64 million in the youth custody reform programme, which includes better training for staff.

Mr Lidington: Given that the youth population is way too high, and I have taken measures to address it. Part of that has been investing £64 million in the youth custody reform programme, which includes better training for staff.

T8. [902772] Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): Is the Secretary of State aware that there remains a serious illegal drugs problem in Norwich and Wayland prisons? Many Ministers talk about creating drugs-free prisons, but when is that going to become a reality in Norfolk? I would like the Secretary of State to answer, please.

Mr Lidington: Norwich prison, like all prisons in the system, is being challenged by new psychoactive substances, which are causing behavioural problems that add to potential aggression on the part of prisoners. These are being actively promoted by organised crime. We are addressing that, both by the provision of improved health and detoxification methods in prisons, and by active intelligence work to disrupt the supply of drugs into prisons, because rolling up those supply chains is what gives us the real opportunity to crack down on drugs.

Mr Speaker: It has to be said that normally hon. Members get the Minister they are given, but the hon. Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham)—I say this for the benefit of new Members—is an old hand and a wily fellow, and he knows how to get what he wants.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): They bump off Prime Ministers.

Mr Speaker: One of his ancestors might have bumped off a Prime Minister, but the hon. Gentleman cannot be held responsible for the behaviour of his distant ancestor.
Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): We all know that too many women are being given short custodial sentences for minor crimes when rehabilitation through women’s centres would be far more productive. Will the Minister assure me that there are no plans for a women’s prison in Wales or, even worse, for a female offender unit annexed to a male prison, and that there are plans for women’s centres in Wales?

Dr Lee: I can confirm that no decision has been made to build a female prison in Wales. As I keep emphasising, the strategy is about what more we can do in the community to help women. I understand and recognise that short sentencing is not delivering the goods, and I also recognise that a number of women are victims themselves. Ultimately, the women’s justice estate is about security for the wider public—to keep people who have done things wrong away from the public—and reducing crime in the longer term by working better with the women concerned.

Mr Speaker: Time at last to hear the voice of Clacton.

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that it is as much in the interests of the EU 27 nations as it is in the interests of my constituents in Clacton and, indeed, people throughout the UK, for there to be a seamless continuation of civil co-operation between the EU 27 and the UK to provide companies, individuals and families with confidence that judgments can and will be enforced across borders? Will he update me on what is being done to secure that co-operation?

Mr Speaker: I was going to suggest that the hon. Gentleman seek an Adjournment debate on the matter, until I realised that in fact he had just conducted one.

Mr Lidington: These days, there are tens of thousands of families and businesses that live and operate across national borders within Europe. A comprehensive and ambitious civil justice co-operation agreement between the United Kingdom and the EU 27 will be very much in the interests of all parties.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): You will know, Mr Speaker, that girls and vulnerable women were subject to horrendous abuse and rape by a sexual exploitation gang in Newcastle. Some of the perpetrators were recently convicted as part of Operation Sanctuary, but there are victims who feel that they have not had justice. I know of at least one who has been denied compensation for horrific abuse, because of time spent in juvenile detention as a consequence of that abuse. Does the Minister think that is just? If not, will he amend the criminal injuries compensation scheme to ensure justice?

Dr Lee: I recently met the chief executive of the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority and was convinced that it has in place systems to deal appropriately with all cases. However, if there is a particular case that is of concern to the hon. Lady, would she please write to me? I will respond.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Repeated failures in facilities management contracts are discovered every time the Justice Committee visits a prison. The latest example is the 22 showers left unrepaired for months at Rochester that we saw last week. Will my right hon. Friend conduct an urgent review of the operation of the contracts and the appropriateness of penalties, and will he speed up the work that is required to be done?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend makes a good point. When an inspector or, for that matter, my hon. Friend’s Committee draws attention to problems of that kind, we certainly take that up firmly with the contractor concerned. I am also keen that we learn and apply lessons about how previous contracts were negotiated to ensure that we get better performance in future.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): It was confirmed in the Budget that the Ministry of Justice will be cut by 40% in the decade to 2020, which is more than any other Department. We have already seen a significant reduction in judges, lay members and accessible tribunal hearing services. Will the Minister confirm today that enough is enough and that there will be no more cuts in the south-east region?
Mr Lidington: The figures that were issued at the same time as the Budget simply repeated those that featured in the current public expenditure round, so there was actually no change. Within our budget, we are investing £1 billion in the modernisation of the courts and recruiting 2,500 additional prison officers.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I thought that we had signed up to the all-singing, all-dancing EU prisoner transfer directive, so why, still, are 42% of the 10,000 foreign nationals in our prisons from EU countries? Why do we not send them back to where they came from?

Mr Gyimah: I thank my hon. Friend for that question—again. I think he asked the same question at the previous justice Question Time. As he is aware, even with prisoner transfer agreements, it is down to the receiving country to take those prisoners. We cannot force them to do so even when we have an agreement in place. The majority of prisoners who we send back to their home countries are sent under the early removal scheme, and 40,000 prisoners have been sent back home since 2010.

Mr Speaker: Members regularly ask the same question again, as I am often wont to observe. Repetition is not a novel phenomenon in the House of Commons.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I have been approached by a constituent whose vulnerable daughter was raped by a male under the age of 18 who was not given a custodial sentence. I am concerned that the lenient sentence sets a precedent for lesser sentences and does not give sufficient regard to the suffering of the victim. Will the Minister agree to meet me and the family of this rape victim to discuss the sentencing guidelines for those who commit rape when under 18?

Dominic Raab: I thank the hon. Gentleman. I totally understand the anguish of the victim and the family in these kinds of cases. He will know that sentencing guidelines—not just the sentences—are set by the Sentencing Council and not the Ministry of Justice, but I can confirm that the new guidelines on sentencing under-18s for sexual offences came into effect in June, and he may wish to take a look at those.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: There are very few Scottish National party Members in the Chamber. I will take a couple more questions.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): In my constituency, we have a higher level of road traffic incidents, including fatalities, compared with the rest of Sussex. I have long campaigned for increased sentences for dangerous driving. What signal does my hon. Friend believe was sent by the Government’s recent announcement on proposed increases to dangerous driving sentences?

Dominic Raab: We consulted extensively on that matter. Bearing in mind the seriousness of the worst offences and the anguish of the families, we have set out proposals to increase the maximum sentence for dangerous driving to life imprisonment. That is the reality for those engaged in such wilful acts.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): My constituents, Mr and Mrs Fleeting, lost their brave son, Robert, in a non-combat death when he was serving in our forces at an English base. There cannot be closure for them as there was no inquest by jury. After a positive initial meeting with the Minister, there has been no follow-up, and that is compounding Mr and Mrs Fleeting’s grief. Will the Minister today agree to meet my constituents to address this appalling issue?

Mr Lidington: I or one of my ministerial team will be happy to discuss the case further. The hon. Lady will appreciate that we need to understand all the detail before we make any public comment.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I believe that the point of order flows directly from questions. I will take it if it is dealt with very briefly.

Conor McGinn: Mr Speaker, you will be aware of my campaign to introduce Helen’s law. On 14 September, I wrote to the Justice Secretary, asking him to meet Marie McCourt, Helen’s mother, and victims’ families about this issue. Having not received a reply two months later, I tabled a parliamentary question to ask when that meeting was likely to happen. That parliamentary question was answered on 1 December and said that the correspondence had been sent to my office on 16 November. After a trawl of my correspondence, I found that none such had been received. Having contacted the Ministry of Justice, it transpired that, in fact, none had been sent because it was still waiting on ministerial approval. What does that say about the Government’s attitude to the families of victims who have suffered so grievously? Can you advise me, Mr Speaker—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I can certainly give him two pieces of advice. First, a very important matter though this is, it does not flow from this oral questions session, as I had, perhaps wrongly, understood it to do. Secondly, may I offer the hon. Gentleman a tip, which he could learn from many a senior hand in this place? If what the hon. Gentleman described happens again, he should table a question to the Minister—

Conor McGinn: I did.

Mr Speaker: Let me finish. The hon. Gentleman should table a question to the Minister, demanding to know when that which was promised will be delivered. [Interruption.] The hon. Gentleman is gesticulating from a sedentary position to give the impression that that is precisely what he did. If he still did not get a response, as he should have done, my advice is that persistence pays; he should just keep going until he gets there. Alternatively, he should approach the Minister’s office and seek a meeting. This is a very unsatisfactory state of affairs. However, knowing the Secretary of State for Justice as I do, I know that he is polite to a fault. Therefore, the error will have been inadvertent. It is extremely incompetent, but no further time of the House should be taken up today. I suggest that the hon. Gentleman and the Secretary of State meet, but I readily acknowledge to the hon. Gentleman that the situation is most unsatisfactory.

1.[Official Report, 21 December 2017, Vol. 633, c. 6MC.]
EU Exit Negotiations

12.40 pm

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union if he will make a statement on progress of the Brexit negotiations between the UK and the European Union.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): I start by apologising for my voice. Once again, I have acquired the single European cough, but I hope that it will pass.

Negotiations regarding our exit from the European Union are ongoing as we speak. Indeed, we are in the middle of an ongoing round. As such, I have to be a bit more circumspect than usual. We held further talks in Brussels over the past few days and progress has been made, but we have not yet reached a final conclusion. However, I believe that we are now close to concluding the first phase of the negotiations and moving on to talk about our future trade relations. There is much common understanding, and both sides agree that we must move forward together.

Our aims in this negotiation remain as they have always been. In particular, on the issue of Northern Ireland and Ireland, we have been clear that we want to protect all elements of the Good Friday/Belfast agreement to maintain the common travel area and to protect associated rights. We want to ensure that there is no hard border between Ireland and Northern Ireland. We recognise that, as we exit, we must respect the integrity of the EU single market and the customs union, but we are equally clear that we must respect the integrity of the United Kingdom.

There remain some final issues to resolve that require further negotiation and consultation over the coming days. Our officials are in continuous contact, and we expect to reconvene in Brussels later this week for further negotiations. I or the Prime Minister will formally update Parliament once this round of negotiations concludes, as I have done for every round so far. As was made clear by the comments from President Juncker and President Tusk yesterday, all parties remain confident of reaching a positive conclusion in the course of the week.

Keir Starmer: What an embarrassment. The last 24 hours have given a new meaning to the phrase “coalition of chaos”. Yesterday morning, No. 10 was briefing that a deal would be signed. There was high expectation that the Prime Minister would make a triumphant statement to the House. By teatime, we had a 49-second press conference saying that the deal was off. It is one thing to go to Brussels and fall out with those on the other side of the negotiating table; it is quite another to go to Brussels and fall out with those who are supposedly on our own side of the negotiating table. If ever there was a day for the Prime Minister to come to this House to answer questions, it is today.

But let us not be fooled that yesterday was just about choreography. There are two underlying causes of this latest and most serious failure. The first can be traced back to the Prime Minister’s conference speech in October last year, when she recklessly swept options such as the customs union and the single market off the table, and ruled out any role for the European Court of Justice, yet maintained that she could avoid a hard border in Northern Ireland. Well, yesterday the rubber hit the road. Fantasy met brutal reality. Labour is clear that there needs to be a UK-wide response to Brexit, so the question for the Government today is this: will the Prime Minister now rethink her reckless red lines and put options such a customs union and single market as back on the table for negotiations? If the price of the Prime Minister’s approach is the break-up of the Union and the reopening of bitter divides in Northern Ireland, that price is too high.

The second major reason for yesterday’s failure is that we have a Prime Minister who is so weak that the Democratic Unionist party has a veto over any proposal she makes. What precedent does it set when the Prime Minister is called out of negotiations at the 11th hour to be told by the DUP that the deal is off? What signal does that send to the EU about the Prime Minister’s ability to deliver Brexit?

Yesterday confirmed what we already knew: the DUP tail is wagging the Tory dog. This is now deeply serious, so what assurance can the Secretary of State give to the House that a deal will be agreed by the end of the week? Will he now drop the proposal for a fixed deadline in law for exit day of 29 March 2019? If ever there was an example of why that would be absurd, yesterday was it.

Mr Davis: The right hon. and learned Gentleman’s speeches in such proceedings are becoming rather repetitive—they are always crowing and carping. [Interjection.]

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Davis: Given my voice, I will wait it out, Mr Speaker.

Let us start with this issue of the single market and customs union. I am glad to see the shadow Chancellor in the Chamber, because he said earlier this year that remaining in the single market would be interpreted as “not respecting” the referendum result. The shadow International Trade Secretary—I cannot see him here—said that a permanent customs union is “deeply unattractive”. He said that as a “transitional phase”, it “might be thought to have some merit. However, as an end point it is deeply unattractive.”

In fact, he described it rather later as “a disaster”. So much for Labour policy on this matter; we can see why it has changed 10 times in the course of the last year.

On the question with respect to the United Kingdom, I said in my response to the urgent question that I would be circumspect, and I intend to be. I am not going to go in for tit-for-tat comments—that would be very bad for our negotiations—but I will take the opportunity to rebut one falsehood I saw being stirred up by various of our political opponents yesterday: the suggestion that we might depart the European Union but leave one part of the United Kingdom behind, still inside the single market and customs union. That is emphatically not something that the UK Government are considering. So when the First Minister of Wales complains about it, the First Minister of Scotland says it is a reason to start banging the tattered drum of independence, or the Mayor of London says it justifies a hard border around the M25, I say they are making a foolish mistake. No UK Government would allow such a thing, let alone a Conservative and Unionist one.
Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend appreciate that, whether it is in relation to regulatory alignment in Northern Ireland, or in relation to citizens’ rights in respect of these negotiations, there is a serious danger that the European Court of Justice will get itself into every nook and cranny? There is no way in which it can be contained under article 344 of the treaty or, for that matter, in relation to the interpretation of all the matters I have just referred to.

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend, who has a long history of wisdom in this subject—[Interruption.] Wisdom—he saw it before most Opposition Members did. He has a long history with this subject, and he explains better than I could why we said that no divergence is a bad option.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): On reflection, I think I prefer the phrase “the rubber has hit the road” to the one that I was going to use to describe yesterday’s fiasco.

It is no surprise that leadership contenders are now circling the Prime Minister. I can reveal that there is a vacancy coming up, because the Prime Minister is today being interviewed for the job of Scotland football manager, where her fantastic ability to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory could be put to very good use.

A Government who said they would bring sovereignty back to Parliament are now being controlled by someone who is not even a Member of this Parliament. A Government who refuse to give Parliament any say in the development of our negotiating position are now allowing that negotiating position to be dictated by the leader of a minority Parliament in the smallest of the four nations of this Union. I could not put it better than the shadow Minister: what a shambles; what a complete mess.

Will the Secretary of State now go back to “Scotland’s Place in Europe”, the document published by the Scottish Government that his Government rejected out of hand a year ago, and use that as a basis to produce a solution to an otherwise intractable problem? The fact is that the Government’s red lines are not compatible with each other, as the Brexit Committee concluded only last week. We were therefore unable to see how it is possible to reconcile leaving the customs union with avoiding a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic. Will the Secretary of State go back to that paper and use it as a basis for reopening negotiations?

Mr Speaker: Order. I think the hon. Gentleman has concluded his remarks. [Interruption.] The problem is that he has taken one and half minutes plus, and there is huge pressure on time, so I think we must now proceed.

Mr Davis: Shall I reply?

Mr Speaker: Yes, that is only fair, as I allowed the hon. Gentleman to blurt out his question to allow the Secretary of State briefly to answer.

Mr Davis: I will answer very briefly. First, I am very surprised by the hon. Gentleman, of all people, being so dismissive of small nations. Secondly, the Scottish Government document to which he refers was read carefully, and many of its elements are consistent with our negotiating strategy, not least the aim of protecting employment rights. I really think he should recognise that.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency states that only 5% of Northern Ireland’s sales cross the border south and only 1.6% of the Republic’s exports go north. The Government paper, confirmed by the head of Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, says that that is easily surmountable without a hard border. The Belfast agreement confirmed Northern Ireland as an integral part of the United Kingdom with standard regulation throughout. We are going to leave the single market and the customs union. Will the Secretary of State confirm that this week the integrity of the United Kingdom comes first, and that, if necessary, no deal is better than a bad deal?

Mr Davis: My right hon. Friend makes his point well. I have already confirmed that the integrity of the United Kingdom comes first. That is why we have adopted the strategy of saying that the issue of maintaining a free border—an open border; a frictionless border—is best dealt with in the next phase: phase 2. Indeed, that is not just my view, but the view of the Taoiseach, who said on 20 August:

“I think the suggestion that”

has been made

“to a certain extent, is common sense. If we are able to have a trade agreement between the EU and UK then of course it will be much easier to sort out issues around any border between Ireland and Northern Ireland.”

I have suddenly realised that the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) has also said the same thing: “To be fair to David Davis, he is right on issues like Northern Ireland. There is only so far you can get before you move to the next phase.”

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. If I am to accommodate a significant number of colleagues, there will be a premium on brevity, which is always brilliantly exemplified by the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn).

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): We all hope that the Government find a form of words that enables the negotiations to move on to phase 2, but do they not have to realise that the reason why there is this problem is because of their decision to leave the customs union and the single market? Given that the leader of the Scottish Conservatives and the Mayor of London have both suggested that whether it is convergence or no divergence, it should be applied to the whole of the United Kingdom, is it not time for the Government finally to recognise that they need to make a different decision if they are to avoid the imposition of a hard border in Northern Ireland?

Mr Davis: I am afraid that, uncharacteristically, the right hon. Gentleman is just wrong about that. I just read out the comment from the Taoiseach in August and a comment from his own Front-Bench spokesman about this subject, and I have set out the views of other Labour Front Benchers who are completely dismissive of being in the customs union in the long run. They are right, I am afraid, in this respect.
Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): The British people are fed up to the back teeth with all this. They want a solution. It might be that regulatory alignment is the solution, but if it is good enough for Northern Ireland, it is good enough for the rest of the country. We are a Union, and we will not allow a deal for one part of our great Union and not for the other. May I gently say to the Secretary of State that there is a consensus in this place? Even though, when we had a debate on a motion, Labour Front Benchers, including the shadow Chancellor, voted against the customs union, we are—over here, over there and down there—as one. There is a solution. I do not care how we wrap it up in whatever fancy words, but if it conveys the effect on British business of the single market and the customs union, let us grab it, seize it, rub out the red lines, move on, work together, build a consensus, and get a deal for our nation.

Mr Davis: My right hon. Friend makes her case with her characteristic tenacity. She can have this as a guarantee from me: we will not be treating any part of the United Kingdom differently from any other part.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): The way to solve the border issue, to protect the Good Friday agreement and to hold our United Kingdom together is to stay in the customs union and single market. Is it not the case that the Government only have themselves to blame for choosing—to rule this option out when they do not have to, which is putting the future of our country at risk?

Mr Davis: I think that the hon. Lady was elected on a manifesto pledge to respect the result of the referendum, and her own shadow Chancellor said that staying in would not respect that result.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend share my sense of gratitude to our friends in the Democratic Unionist party who have helped Her Majesty’s Government to stick to their own policy in these negotiations? Is it not essential that the red lines on maintaining the United Kingdom, and on regulatory divergence whence the benefits of leaving come, are indelible red lines?

Mr Davis: The red line, for me, is delivering the best Brexit for Britain, and that is what we will do.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Actually, there is not a consensus in this House about what should happen. The Government are making a choice. They are choosing a majority that is based on the DUP and trying to keep the Conservative party together, whereas in actual fact there is a vast majority in this House, in the country and in the House of Lords in favour of us staying in the customs union so that we keep the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland together and do not harm our trade. Why will not the Secretary of State just see that?

Mr Davis: As ever, the hon. Gentleman asks an intelligent question, and I will answer it as clearly as I can. He said that we are making a choice. We are, and it is based not on any one party, but on 17.5 million votes that were cast to leave the European Union.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): May I point out to my right hon. Friend what I know he will agree with: the consensus that we must deliver is the consensus that was delivered in the referendum vote last year, and that was not for some half-in, half-out solution now being advocated by Her Majesty’s official Opposition?

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend is of course right. The other thing we can say is that 85% of the Members of this House were elected on manifestos that said they would respect that referendum. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I just make two points. First, there is a lot of noise in the Chamber. Members must be heard. Secondly, may I say very gently to the Secretary of State that I appreciate that he has trouble with his voice, but that accentuates the importance of his facing the House so that we can all hear him?

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): In the chaos that was yesterday, it did at least seem to be clear at 9 o’clock in the morning that the Government believed in the idea of regulatory alignment for Northern Ireland and for the Republic, but what is their position now? Have they now ditched any idea of regulatory alignment for Northern Ireland, or do they recognise that actually regulatory alignment is really important not just for the Good Friday agreement, but for businesses right across the United Kingdom? That is what the Secretary of State should be trying to achieve for all of us.

Mr Davis: I refer the right hon. Lady to the speech that the Prime Minister made in Florence, because in it she dealt with—[Interruption.] Clearly, if Opposition Members cannot read, that is not a problem. I refer the right hon. Lady to that speech, because in it the Prime Minister made a very plain case for the sorts of divergence that we would see after we left. She said that there are areas in which we want to achieve the same outcomes, but by different regulatory methods. We want to maintain safety, food standards, animal welfare and employment rights, but we do not have to do that by exactly the same mechanism as everybody else. That is what regulatory alignment means.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): The Secretary of State is absolutely right to remind the House that the only way of respecting the result of the referendum is by leaving the customs union and single market, which are part and parcel of the EU. Does he accept that in any negotiation there will be ups and downs, and that we should remember that both sides in this negotiation have agreed to the principle that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed?

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend is right, and that was part of the text that we discussed yesterday. Of course there will be ups and downs and pressure points—that is what negotiations are like. I have to tell the House that yesterday it was not London but Brussels that forecast an instant outcome. We had said that Monday’s discussion was a “staging post”, and we want to get to the outcome by 15 December—full stop.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): I am sure that millions of members of the public think that our Government are not being tough enough with the European Union,
and that in these negotiations, we should say clearly that the EU is stopping the continued co-operation—

[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I am very keen to accommodate colleagues, and please rest assured that I will do everything I can to do so, but the hon. Lady must be heard.

Kate Hoey: The EU is stopping the co-operation, which has been very good, between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. That could continue, but the EU is stopping it. Is it not time that the Government said so?

Mr Davis: The hon. Lady makes a point that is, I am sure, supported by many members of the public. I said at the beginning of the process more than a year ago that I would be unusually courteous and polite to the other side in this negotiation. I will continue to be so, because that is the best way to advance the British cause.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): Yesterday’s difficulties demonstrate how hard it will be to get an overall agreement. If there is no trade agreement, there will be no transition period beyond 2019. Will the Secretary of State ensure that the necessary contingency planning takes place in case that happens, and that that planning includes identifying the best way of making sure that the border between the north and south of Ireland is as soft as possible?

Mr Davis: I think I said to my hon. Friend when he was Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee that we had a great deal of contingency planning under way to deal with all options, from the option we are seeking—the free trade agreement—right down to the option we are not seeking, which is no agreement. That is the whole range, and we are looking at and planning for all those outcomes. More than 150 projects are already under way, and there will be more.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): It should come as no surprise that Dublin and the Irish Government wish to advance their interests. The aggressive and anti-Unionist way in which they have gone about doing so is disgraceful. It has set back Anglo-Irish relations and damaged the relationships built up within Northern Ireland in relation to the devolution settlement. That damage will take a long time to repair.

It should also come as no surprise that the Democratic Unionist party stands strong for the Union and stands strong for Northern Ireland’s place in the Union under the terms of the devolved settlement. We will not allow any settlement to be agreed that causes the political or economic divergence of Northern Ireland from the rest of the United Kingdom. To do so would be not only politically damaging, but economically catastrophic for everyone in Northern Ireland—Unionist, nationalist, remain or Brexiteer.

The reality is that one of the good things that came out of yesterday was an agreement from Members on both sides of the House—from Labour and Conservative Back Benchers—as well as from Ruth Davidson, Carwyn Jones and everybody else, that the United Kingdom stands together and that nothing will happen that will cause the breakup of this great United Kingdom.

Mr Davis: The right hon. Gentleman is dead right. It is no surprise that the Democratic Unionist party stands for the United Kingdom. So, equally, does the Conservative and Unionist party.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Tens of thousands of jobs in my constituency are in sectors that are urging the Government to adopt regulatory alignment. May I therefore support the Prime Minister in making that offer to the European Union, on the condition that it applies, as others have said, to the whole United Kingdom?

Mr Davis: The presumption of the discussion was that everything we talked about applied to the whole United Kingdom. I reiterate that alignment is not harmonisation. It is not having exactly the same rules; it is sometimes having mutually recognised rules, mutually recognised inspection and all that sort of thing. That is what we are aiming at.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): In his response to my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall), the Brexit Secretary intimated that staying in the customs union and single market would betray the referendum result. No one told my constituents or the country before the referendum that Brexit would entail leaving the customs union and the single market. In the light of yesterday’s shambles, will the Brexit Secretary look again at the Government’s decision and move towards staying in the customs union and the single market?

Mr Davis: If the hon. Lady will forgive a factual correction, people certainly did. The Prime Minister at the time did so, as did the Chancellor at the time and, I think, the leaders of the leave and remain campaigns. I suggest that the hon. Lady looks at the records of “The Andrew Marr Show”, on which they all said that.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): May we return to the Prime Minister’s original intention that there would be no running commentary? This discussion is driving the Opposition into a state of apoplexy when strategic patience is required.

Mr Davis: I thank my right hon. Friend for his inducement to my patience.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): If the Secretary of State is serious about wanting a solution in the national interest that commands majority support in Northern Ireland, the rest of the United Kingdom and this House—I am delighted to say that that would seem to include my own Front Benchers—why does he not bring to this House a motion, on a free vote, on staying in the customs union and the single market—full stop.

Mr Davis: We were elected on a manifesto that said that we would leave the customs union and single market—full stop.
Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Does the Secretary of State believe that it is possible to leave the single market and the customs union, yet have UK regulatory alignment?

Mr Davis: As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach), yes, but using things such as the mutual recognition and alignment of standards. That does not mean having the same standards; it means having ones that give similar results.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I understand that yesterday the Prime Minister had to withdraw her agreement to her own agreed text as a result of the DUP’s intervention. Does the Minister really think that it is acceptable for a British Prime Minister to have to conduct herself in such a way in international negotiations?

Mr Davis: I refer the hon. and learned Lady to the short speech given at the press conference by Jean-Claude Juncker, who clearly thought that the Prime Minister had carried herself off with great dignity and effectiveness.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that this discussion demonstrates that no workable solution to the border conundrum will satisfy the purists, wherever they stand in the debate? Does he therefore agree with the point made by Bertie Ahern and William Hague in recent days that the way through this is to show a much greater appetite for using technology-based solutions—\textit{[Interruption.]}\right\} Does he agree that on the problems that technology cannot overcome, all sides will just have to show flexibility and adaptability about how rigidly they enforce and interpret their own principles and border rules?

Mr Davis: My right hon. Friend is absolutely on the nail, although what he said clearly did not go down very well with the luddite tendency in the Opposition. The other thing that is required is for us to get on to the second phase and talk about a free trade agreement, which will do more than anything else to facilitate this.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): Perhaps the Secretary of State could accept the constructive offer made by many hon. Members on both sides of the House. The right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) and the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach), as well as Opposition Members, have said that there is a majority in favour of the regulatory alignment that the Prime Minister proposed for Northern Ireland, the Republic and the rest of the United Kingdom. With a few exceptions, the Secretary of State would get a lot of votes from Opposition Members if he put that question. Why does he not just do so?

Mr Davis: We have talked at great length about what we mean by regulatory alignment—I have just done so today. It is not harmonisation, being in the single market, or having exactly the same rules; it is this House exercising its democratic right to choose our own laws in such a way as to maximise our ability to sell abroad. That is how it will work.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): Is it worth gently reminding the Taoiseach and the Government in Dublin how we behaved when they were in financial trouble and we helped bail them out? Is it also worth gently reminding them that, post Brexit, Irish nationals will continue to have the right to live and work in the UK? Finally, is it not worth gently reminding them that the UK is the most important economy to the Republic of Ireland? We wish to be good and productive neighbours, and they should enter into these negotiations with that long-term view in mind.

Mr Davis: I am sure that the Irish Government are conscious of all those things, but let me pick one point that my right hon. Friend made. When I last reported to this House—on 17 November, I think—I reiterated that the common travel area, which allows absolute freedom of movement between the two countries and absolute equality of treatment between our citizens, will remain in place, as will the constitutional protections allowing people from Northern Ireland to choose which nationality they wish to adhere to. We are protecting those rights very carefully.

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): I put it to the Secretary of State that his Government’s dogmatic insistence on pulling us out of the single market and the customs union threatens not only our future jobs, rights and prosperity, but the future territorial integrity of our country. When he looks back in a few years’ time and reflects on his role in creating this mess, how does he think he will feel?

Mr Davis: I say to the hon. Lady what I said at the beginning of this urgent question: all these stories put about by her Labour party co-members yesterday were just nonsense. The Conservative and Unionist party puts the integrity of the United Kingdom at the forefront of its aims.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, as with the Ashes test match, the week is not yet over? It is in the interests of Ireland as well as the UK to avoid a no-deal Brexit and find the long-term strategic partnership, and therefore all parties need to keep talking.

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend, who has a long and distinguished record in the European Parliament and knows the institutions there as well as anybody, brings great wisdom and insight to this discussion, and she is of course absolutely right.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The Government’s sheer incompetence is turning the Brexit negotiations into a national humiliation. Is it not time that the Secretary of State agreed that staying in the single market and the customs union is the only way to solve the Northern Ireland border, and indeed by staying in permanently—I say that as much for the benefit of Labour Front Benchers as for his—and that he should give the people a vote on the deal, to secure popular support for that stance?

Mr Davis: I will break the habit of a lifetime and pay the right hon. Gentleman a compliment: he is at least standing by the manifesto on which he stood at the general election. Of course, being a Liberal Democrat manifesto, it was completely wrong.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): Will the Minister reassure me that when it comes to negotiations with the EU, the Government will pursue a flexible policy that
includes the possibility of establishing a model similar to that of Norway or Switzerland, which would undoubtedly benefit the Irish issue?

Mr Davis: No, the Prime Minister has made it clear that we are not going to take any off-the-shelf model. We are a very large country in European terms, and we have very great trade reach—and very great reach in other respects—so we will choose a model that is appropriate to us.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): The Prime Minister’s humiliation yesterday, when she was forced to disagree with herself, shows that this is less a negotiation and more a set of decisions, and those decisions are being framed by the contradictory red lines that the Government have thrown out, without regard to the consequences, on a hard border, the single market and the customs union. The Secretary of State’s colleague Ruth Davidson said this morning:

“If regulatory alignment in a number of specific areas is the requirement for a frictionless border, then the Prime Minister should conclude this must be on a UK-wide basis.”

She is right, is she not?

Mr Davis: What I will say to the right hon. Gentleman, given that he is a Labour party member, is that he must have much greater experience than I have of disagreeing with himself. Look at his own Front Benchers and the 11 different positions they have taken.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Did you notice, Mr Speaker, that the shadow Minister, just at the end of his question, committed the Labour party to the law of the European Union.

Mr Davis: Effectively. As someone behind me says from a sedentary position, it was 24 June 2016. I cannot remember the exact date when that specific decision was taken, but it reflects the judgment of the British people.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that maintaining the integrity of our country requires that there should never be any internal borders, economic or otherwise, within the territory of the United Kingdom?

Mr Davis: Yes, my right hon. Friend is absolutely right.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): The Secretary of State will know that the Democratic Unionist party and businesses in Northern Ireland have advocated a sensible Brexit deal with Northern Ireland, but does he also agree that the Republic of Ireland, through its intransigence, could risk everything and lose the most out of this?

Mr Davis: The hon. Gentleman is asking me to break my vow of courtesy, so I say, “Get thee behind me, Satan”—this time anyway.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that if regulatory alignment in certain specific areas is a requirement to solve the Northern Ireland border issue, then protecting the constitutional integrity of the United Kingdom requires that solution to be adopted UK wide?

Mr Davis: Every approach we take will treat the whole United Kingdom as a single constitutional entity and a single economic entity.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Yesterday, our Prime Minister was humiliated by having the rug pulled from under her by the DUP. Was she not naive even to attempt to do a deal of the sort she tried to do, knowing that the DUP would inevitably veto it? With the negotiations in such fantastic hands, will the Secretary of State now admit that the only way to move forward without a hard border in Northern Ireland, to protect the jobs of my constituents, is for us to stay in the customs union and the single market?

Mr Davis: No.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): This urgent question is spectacularly badly timed, in the middle of talks to move to the next phase. The truth is—

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman will resume his seat. [Interruption.] Order. I will deal with this. The hon. Gentleman is unfailingly courteous. He is entitled to criticise a Member for submitting an urgent question, but it is not for him to question the judgment of the Chair. I took the view that this matter warranted the attention of the House of Commons today. If the hon. Gentleman wishes to depart from that view, he should not express it on the Floor of the House. If he has a serious question to ask, I am happy to hear it, but I seek his assurance that he is not arguing the toss with the Chair.

Richard Graham: I would never dream of it, Mr Speaker. My point was that many negotiations, if not most, came good towards the end. Therefore, rather than sledging the Government, I urge the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister to maintain their resilience and patience and see this through, which will require compromises on all sides to reach a good solution.

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend makes a very good point.

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): The Secretary of State talks about the will of the people, but of course the Government put leaving the customs union and the single market to the electorate at the general election and lost their majority. Can I ask him a very specific question? Clearly, there is no consensus on having an arrangement whereby only Northern Ireland is part of
the single market and the customs union, and no business or Government I have spoken to think that technology is the answer. He has said that he does not think that keeping the UK overall in the customs union and the single market is the answer, so what does he believe is?

**Mr Davis:** A comprehensive free trade agreement, a customs agreement and all the associated regulatory alignment. While I am on my feet, let me pick the hon. Gentleman up on his comment about the result of the general election. I remind him that 85% of Members of this House were elected on manifestos that said we should leave the European Union.

**Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con):** My right hon. Friend will of course know that the UK has a large surplus in services with the EU. Does he agree that, for me, the single market is the answer, so what does he believe is?

**Mr Davis:** If by alignment my hon. Friend means mechanisms such as mutual recognition, yes, I agree entirely.

**Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op):** I am slightly confused now. Yesterday, the Government seemed to accept the principle that the only way to achieve no border or a soft border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland was through regulatory alignment. Does that principle still stand today? Do the Government accept that that is the only way to deliver the frictionless border?

**Mr Davis:** I can understand the hon. Lady’s confusion if she has not been listening for the past half hour. The simple truth is that we will need to establish arrangements whereby we get the same or similar outcomes for some areas of industry and service—no more, no less.

**Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con):** What can be done to help our good friends, the Irish Government, to climb down from the position that they were unwittingly misled into adopting yesterday?

**Mr Davis:** The aim of the negotiation is together to get to an outcome that serves our interests, the EU27’s interests and particularly Ireland’s interests because, as my hon. Friend says, they are our good friends and the people who, in some ways, are closest to us.

**Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP):** If the Secretary of State is so confident that we in this place, the media and the general public are misinterpreting what may or may not have been in the draft agreement, will he publish it to clear things up?

**Mr Davis:** I cannot imagine that the hon. Gentleman thinks that would advance the negotiations one jot.

**James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con):** The EU Trade Commissioner, Cecilia Malmström, has today tweeted that when we leave, our existing free trade agreements will not be rolled over. That is obviously a significant point, so further to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (John Stevenson), does that not add weight at least to considering those trade models whereby we can negotiate our own trade deals globally, but remain part of those that the European Free Trade Association currently has?

**Mr Davis:** There is more than one benefit to departing from the European Union. One is trade arrangements, and we are well advanced in our plans for dealing with those ongoing trade arrangements and ensuring that we do roll them over.

**Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab):** Yesterday, for the first time, the Secretary of State realised that the importance of the Irish border issue extends beyond the island of Ireland. To unite the United Kingdom, will he meet the Scottish and Welsh First Ministers to discuss regulatory alignment because it impacts on everyone? If he wants to unite the United Kingdom, he must do better.

**Mr Davis:** In response to the first half of the hon. Gentleman’s question, I recommend that he read Hansard for my statements here, which will prove that he is absolutely wrong. It is really quite a calumny.

As for the First Ministers, there is a body called the Joint Ministerial Committee, which includes representatives of all the devolved Administrations and meets regularly. Sadly, the Northern Ireland Executive are not there at the moment, which is one of the difficulties we have to deal with.

**Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con):** We leave the EU in 16 months. Will my right hon. Friend assure the House and the country that the EU delegates are well aware that we are preparing to fall back on World Trade Organisation rules if negotiations fail?

**Mr Davis:** I think that that has been apparent for some time.

**Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op):** Does the Secretary of State think that it furthers the cause of the Union to refer to the actions of the First Ministers of Wales and of Scotland as “foolish”, as he did a moment ago? They are not foolish. When it comes to the single market and the customs union, they are absolutely right.

**Mr Davis:** Perhaps the hon. Gentleman wants to give advice to them about how they describe other people.

**Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con):** One of the big prizes to be gained from being free of the European Union is enabling us, as a United Kingdom, to negotiate our own free trade deals across the world. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that nothing in these agreements will fetter our ability to do that?

**Mr Davis:** Yes.

**Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD):** Will the Secretary of State accept that leaving the customs union was not on the ballot paper on 23 June 2016?

**Mr Davis:** It was said earlier that nobody voted for that; nobody knew that that was a consequence. In fact, both sides in the referendum campaign made it plain that departure from the European Union meant departure from the customs union.
Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): Given that in European negotiations nothing is agreed until everything is agreed, does the Secretary of State agree that any concessions that we may now make are contingent on reaching a satisfactory end state free trade deal in future?

Mr Davis: Yes, my hon. Friend is right that in every European negotiation, that phrase, “nothing is agreed till everything is agreed” is a mantra, and it matters.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State tell us the difference between regulatory convergence and regulatory alignment?

Mr Davis: One is about harmonisation; one is not.

Hon. Members: What?

Mr Speaker: The Secretary of State said that one is about harmonisation and the other is not. Somebody suggested that he or she could not hear.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Will the Secretary of State confirm that, in the negotiations, the Government still aim to conclude an agreement on an implementation phase as early as possible in the new year and that that agreement would similarly benefit the European Union?

Mr Davis: Yes, my hon. Friend is exactly right on both counts.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Despite trying to cave in on every EU ask so far, the Government have not been able to conclude the preliminary negotiations in 18 months, yet we are to believe that they will conclude the substantive negotiations in 15 months. They have not been able to agree a good deal with the DUP, yet we are to believe that they will get a good deal from the 27 member states. It is obvious that they do not know a good deal from a bad deal and we are heading towards a no-deal scenario, so when will they start planning and present transparent information on the implications?

Mr Davis: The hon. Gentleman seems to be having an argument with himself in that question. It is seven months of negotiation so far and it will be concluded.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Where are the Government, in terms of our post-club membership, on handing over a bill to the European Union? What is the amount that has been decided: £40 billion, £50 billion, more, or less?

Mr Davis: I am afraid that I will not be drawn on numbers at the moment, but we are pretty close to alignment on that.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): The Irish issue has never been about wandering cows or static cameras. It is about what is written behind me: we have “more in common”. The Irish are our closest neighbours and that is the basis of the Good Friday agreement, which I am disappointed that the Secretary of State did not mention in his opening remarks.

I repeat the same question that I have asked the Secretary of State, the Prime Minister and other Ministers six times since January. When will the Prime Minister show courtesy to the people of Northern Ireland and put a date in her diary at least to visit? If she had been there and listened and talked to people, she might not have ended up in the farce that was yesterday.

Mr Davis: Let us start with the hon. Lady’s opening comments. She said that I did not mention the Northern Ireland agreement. I will read the paragraph from my opening statement: “In particular, on the issue of Northern Ireland and Ireland, we have been clear that we want to protect all elements of the Good Friday/Belfast agreement to maintain the common travel area and the protected associated rights.” So much for that. [Interruption.] Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Despite the noise from many Opposition Members, is it not right that, at this stage of the talks, we are closer to an agreement than we have ever been, that that is a good thing—progress has been made—and that we should want to move on to talks about trade, which will be in our national interest and also in the EU’s interest?

Mr Davis: Yes, my hon. Friend is exactly right. That is pretty much what Jean-Claude Juncker said yesterday.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): Although I readily accept that there are 10 duly elected DUP Members in this House, nevertheless the DUP does not speak for or represent all the people of Northern Ireland. Will the Secretary of State therefore take a few moments to explain to the House, and particularly to all the people of Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom, the benefits for the whole country of the proposals the Prime Minister took to Brussels yesterday? I was profoundly embarrassed on her behalf.

Mr Davis: The aim for the whole country, as the hon. Lady says, is to maximise the trade benefits of being outside the customs union and the single market, while maintaining as much as possible the benefits we currently enjoy. That is the aim and that is what we are heading towards. I am pretty confident that that is what we will achieve.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne) (Lab): It is increasingly clear to anyone watching that the Government are incapable of focusing on anything but Brexit, and even then they are making a complete Horlicks of it. What reassurance can the Secretary of State give that the Government are ready to put country before party, not just on the border issue but on our crucial trade negotiations with the EU and the rest of the world?

Mr Davis: Is Horlicks a parliamentary word, Mr Speaker? I might use it in future. I am the Brexit Secretary, so that is of course what I focus on most of the time. The simple fact is that the free trade agreement the hon. Lady talks about is precisely what we are aiming for. It is exactly where we and Brussels want to get to as quickly as possible.

Mr Speaker: The word is certainly not unparliamentary. It could be said to constitute a form of advertising, but it is not disorderly.
Mr Davis: Or a euphemism.

Mr Speaker: Or indeed a euphemism, as the right hon. Gentleman pertinently observes from a sedentary position.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): When will we have a decision on the rights of EU nationals in the UK? The Secretary of State has yet again forgotten about them amidst the current chaos. More than 3 million people are in limbo with regard to their future rights, including many Irish citizens to whom we have a particular and long-standing duty.

Mr Davis: We recognise that duty. Indeed, I have said from the Dispatch Box that we view it as a moral imperative. We have made plain that we are doing everything possible to ensure that they carry on with their lives as they do now. We have made that plain and I really wish the hon. Gentleman would not frighten people by taking the opposite view.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The customs union was not on the ballot paper in the referendum. The Prime Minister was right yesterday to be willing to sign up to regulatory alignment between Northern Ireland and the EU. From the Secretary of State’s answers today, I think he is suggesting that regulatory alignment should apply to the whole UK. Will he confirm that that is the point he is making, and will he explain how he sees that being delivered?

Mr Davis: Of course the referendum question was a short question, but it was a very long campaign. In that campaign, both sides made it plain that being outside the union meant being outside the customs union and outside the single market. Both sides made that plain and, if need be, I can point the right hon. Gentleman to the television programmes on which that was said. I have explained to the House that regulatory alignment is not harmonisation. It is a question of ensuring similar outcomes in areas where we want to have trade relationships and free and frictionless trade. Anything we agree for Northern Ireland in that respect, if we get our free trade area, will apply to the whole country.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State confirm today that Brexit is the “easiest thing in human history”?

If it is, how is it that the Government are incapable of making it so?

Mr Davis: As the House can see, it is a complete cinch.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Of course the British people voted to leave the European Union, but the common market is extremely popular with the public. We joined the customs union in 1973. Not only would staying in it help to resolve the Irish issues, it would boost British exporters across the country.

Mr Davis: I say to the hon. Lady that if it was still just the common market I suspect the vote might have been different.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): The Secretary of State says a vote to leave was a vote to leave the single market and the customs union, but that is not what leavers said. He says that the Conservative manifesto committed to pulling us out of both, but that is not what the majority of the public voted for. Is it not time to accept that he will have a majority in this House for a Brexit based on membership of the single market and the customs union, but that we will never give him a majority for a destructive hard Brexit?

Mr Davis: Nobody wants a majority for a destructive Brexit. We want a majority for a constructive Brexit.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The Prime Minister pushed the Secretary of State to one side to take personal responsibility for leading the negotiations yesterday. Why is she not here today to update the House? Did Arlene Foster say no?

Mr Davis: I do not know—they complain when I come and they complain when I do not come.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): The choices the Secretary of State has made have led him into a cul-de-sac where he now has to make a choice between honouring the spirit of the Good Friday agreement or pleasing the right wingers on his own side and the DUP. Which choice is he going to make?

Mr Davis: I have to make a choice that preserves everything in the Good Friday agreement and preserves the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): May I thank the Secretary of State for proving yesterday that he can listen and that when he tells Europe no, he means no? We thank him on behalf of the Northern Ireland. Will he take the next available opportunity to speak to the Dublin Government and let them know that if they continue down this reckless path and do not get a trade deal with us, they will end up stumping up a further £1.5 billion in membership fees to the European Union? Better to move to a trade deal sooner rather than later.

Mr Davis: As I said, I am not going to go in for any tit-for-tat with other Governments. What I will say is that the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that the best outcome for Ireland is a free trade deal and a customs agreement. That will preserve by far and away the largest portion of its trade and protect its economy. That is what we are trying to do.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): Yesterday’s events were a shambles that must undermine our credibility in our negotiations with the EU. However, if there are two positives, they are, first, the Government’s belated recognition of the importance of regulatory alignment with Europe in going forward; and secondly, the display of unity, with all parts of the United Kingdom demanding that what is good for one is good for all. Will the Secretary of State recognise the logic of that, change his position and negotiate on the basis of access to the single market and the customs union?
Mr Davis: First, the hon. Gentleman does not need to point out to a member of the Conservative and Unionist party the importance of the United Kingdom. Secondly, the Union does not require membership of the single market. As far as I remember, the United Kingdom existed well before we were a member of the single market.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Article 50 was designed to be harsh on the country that triggered it. Its author, Mr Giuliano Amato, a former Italian Prime Minister, described it as a “safety valve that was there” but should never be used. Are we not setting an unrealistic timescale and is it not time for us to seek to delay the implementation of leaving the European Union, so we can resolve issues around the customs union and the single market?

Mr Davis: I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman, and if I were to give him one piece of advice about negotiations, it would be not to give up before they start.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): As Arlene Foster now seems to be running the rule over the Government’s EU exit negotiations, are we to expect that a Member from the DUP Bench will join the Secretary of State’s team in a confidence and supply arrangement?

Mr Davis: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman should address that question to those on the DUP Bench, not to those on the Government Benches.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): The Secretary of State says he is serious about delivering the best for the United Kingdom and that he thinks Brexit is a cinch. The EU Commissioners estimate that there are currently 142 areas of north-south co-operation that depend on EU law. Is the plan for Northern Ireland to remain aligned in each of those 142 areas, or more widely?

Mr Davis: First, the hon. Lady should not take sarcasm as fact. Secondly, the 142 areas do not all rely on EU law. I am afraid she is factually wrong.

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): Presuming that the Government do finally make progress at some stage and we leave the single market, will the Secretary of State outline to the House what sort of agreement he expects to reach on UK access to the European market for services?

Mr Davis: First, we have made a lot of progress. The question this week is sufficient progress—on that, by the way, I am quoting Jean-Claude Juncker again. On the hon. Gentleman’s substantive question, we would expect the free trade agreement to include the services sector.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) rightly raised the issue of citizens’ rights. Thousands of people in my constituency, and millions across Britain and the EU, are worried about their futures. Last year, we were told that this would be sorted out swiftly and that it would be simple, but it turns out that it is much more complicated. What is the position now in relation to the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice?

Mr Davis: That is one of the elements being discussed this week. The main aim is not around ECJ jurisdiction but to get the treatment of both British citizens and European citizens to be symmetrical—to be similar.
Report on Recent Terrorist Attacks

1.40 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on David Anderson’s report published today on recent terrorist attacks in London and Manchester. The attacks that took place this year shocked us all. Our thoughts remain with the victims of the attacks and all those affected by them. I am conscious that many will still be suffering acutely. However painful, it is essential that we examine what happened so that we can maximise the chances of preventing further attacks.

At the outset, I would like to remind hon. Members of the context. Andrew Parker, the director general of MI5, recently said that we were facing “a dramatic upshift” in terrorist threats. As the so-called caliphate in Syria and Iraq has weakened, so Daesh has increasingly turned its attention to encouraging people to launch attacks in their home countries. Indeed, there is more terrorist activity, partly inspired and also enabled by terrorist propaganda and instructional videos online. Plots are developing more quickly from radicalisation to attack and threats are becoming harder to detect, partly due to the challenge of accessing communications that are increasingly end-to-end encrypted.

MI5 and counter-terrorism policing are currently running well over 500 live operations—up one third since the beginning of the year—involving roughly 3,000 subjects of interest. In addition, over 20,000 further individuals—closed subjects of interest—have previously been investigated and may again pose a threat. I pay tribute to MI5 and the police, who work tirelessly to keep us safe. I can announce today that they have now disrupted 22 Islamist terrorist plots since the murder of Lee Rigby in May 2013, including nine since the Westminster attack this March.

I will now turn to the reviews. Counter-terrorism policing and MI5 have conducted a thorough review process, and I have received from them 10 highly classified documents that analyse the attacks and potential improvements to operational practices. In June, I commissioned David Anderson QC to provide independent assurance of, and external challenge to, the reviews. I am today placing a copy of his unclassified assessment of the reviews in the House of Commons Library. Copies will also be made available in the Vote Office.

David Anderson concludes that the reviews have been carried out in an “impressively thorough and fair” manner, and he endorses, so far as he feels qualified to do so, the conclusions and recommendations. Based on the MI5 and police reviews, David Anderson explains that, in the case of the Westminster attack, Khalid Masood was a closed subject of interest at the time of the attack and that neither MI5 nor the police had any reason to anticipate the attack. Regarding the Manchester Arena attack, Salman Abedi was also a closed subject of interest at the time of the attack and so not under active investigation. In early 2017, MI5 none the less received intelligence on him that was assessed as not being related to terrorism. In retrospect, the intelligence can be seen to have been highly relevant. It cannot be known whether, had an investigation been reopened at the time, Abedi’s plans could have been stopped. MI5 assesses that it would have been unlikely.

Across the attacks, including Manchester Arena, David Anderson notes that MI5 and counter-terrorism policing got a great deal right. In relation to Manchester, however, he also commented: “It is conceivable that the...attack...might have been averted had the cards fallen differently”.

In the case of London Bridge, Khuram Butt was an active subject of interest who had been under investigation since mid-2015. A number of different investigative means were deployed against him, but they did not reveal his plans. His two conspirators had never been investigated by MI5 or counter-terrorism policing. In regards to Finsbury Park, neither MI5 nor the police had any intelligence about this attack.

Taken as a whole, MI5 and counter-terrorism policing conclude that they could not “find any key moments where different decisions would have made it likely that they could have stopped any of the attacks”. None the less, they go on to make a total of 126 recommendations. The recommendations made in the MI5 and police operational review fall into four broad categories. First, there needs to be a concerted effort to enhance the ability of MI5 and the police to use data to detect activity of concern and to test new approaches in the acquisition, sharing and analysis of data. Secondly, MI5 should share its intelligence more widely; and work with partners such as local authorities on how best to manage the risk posed by closed subjects of interest in particular. We are considering undertaking multi-agency pilots in a number of areas, including Greater Manchester, and I have already started discussing how to take this forward with Andy Burnham. Thirdly, there should be a new approach to managing domestic extremism, particularly extreme right-wing groups, where their activity meets the definition of terrorism. Fourthly, a large number of detailed and technical changes could be made to improve existing operational counter-terrorism processes.

David Anderson ends his report with several reflections. The first is that intelligence is imperfect and that investigators are making tough judgments based on incomplete information. This unfortunately means that not every attack can be stopped. As we do not live in a surveillance state, it will always be a challenge to law enforcement to stop determined attackers getting through. Despite this, we should remember that most attacks continue to be successfully disrupted. Lastly, David Anderson concludes that even marginal improvements are capable of paying dividends that could tip the balance in favour of the security forces in future cases.

I have discussed these reviews at length with David Anderson, and separately with Andrew Parker and the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Cressida Dick, as well as their senior teams. I am grateful for all their work and am confident that they have asked the right questions and drawn the right conclusions. I am clear, as are they, that the implementation of the recommendations is crucial. There will be those who seek to apportion blame for the attacks. We should be united in our clarity that it lies squarely with those whose cowardly acts killed 36 innocent people this year and with the b motives who encouraged them. At the same time, we must learn all that we can from these attacks and make sure that our overall counter-terrorism response is equal to the shift we have seen in the threat.
Labour Members believe that that is a telling phrase.

the cards fallen differently”.

It is right that those inquests proceed wherever they can. If the coroners consider that they cannot fully deal with the relevant issues, that is the point to decide whether an inquiry is needed. We are ruling nothing out.

I welcome the Intelligence and Security Committee’s intention to make these attacks its top priority, and I have already discussed this with my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve). As I have already outlined, implementation of the recommendations will be crucial. I have asked David Anderson to provide an independent stock-take of progress in a year’s time. Linked to implementation, however, are resources. We will shortly be announcing the budgets for policing for 2018-19, and I am clear that we must ensure that counter-terrorism policing has the resources needed to deal with the threats we face.

These recommendations need to fit into the broader Government review of our counter-terrorism strategy. That review reaches well beyond MI5 and counter-terrorism policing to look at the whole of government response and at how we can work better with communities, the private sector and international partners. I would like to conclude by thanking David Anderson for his independent assurance of these reviews, and I again pay tribute to those relatives and survivors today. The thoughts of everyone in this House and the other place are with the victims, their families and all those affected by the attacks. I commend this statement to the House.

1.50 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for prior sight of both the report and her statement. It was sad to read the report and to reimagine, and almost relive, the terrible terrorist incidents that we have seen this year, but it must be infinitely sad for the relatives of the victims and for the survivors. As the Home Secretary has said, the thoughts of everyone in this House and the other place are with the victims, their families and all those affected by the attacks. I commend this statement to the House.

As the Home Secretary noted, Salman Abedi was a closed subject of interest and was not under active investigation; but MI5 came by intelligence in the months before the attack which— as David Anderson put it— had its true significance been properly understood, would have caused an investigation into him to be reopened. He was identified as one of a small number of closed subjects of interest who merited further consideration, but, sadly, the meeting to discuss that was scheduled for 31 May, and the attack on the Manchester Arena took place on 22 May.

One of the most important recommendations in the report is the need for better sharing of intelligence. Will the Home Secretary say more about the multi-agency pilots, and about where her discussions with my colleague Andy Burnham, the former Member of Parliament for Leigh and the Mayor of Manchester, are going? I think that he would like to know that as well.

The Home Secretary concedes that linked to the implementation of review recommendations are resources. As we say on this side of the House, you cannot keep people safe on the cheap. The Home Secretary will shortly be announcing the budgets for policing in 2017-18. She talks about ensuring that those involved in counter-terrorism policing have the resources that they need, but David Anderson comments that "the indicative profile of their grant allocation over the next three years sees a reduction of 7.2% in their budgets."

Does the Home Secretary accept that comment, and does she agree with David Anderson’s remarks about the reliance of MI5 and counter-terrorism agencies on community policing? Does she accept that proper funding for community policing is at least as important as resources for counter-terrorism proper?

Community policing is the frontline of the community’s defence against terror. I thank MI5 and the counter-terrorism agencies for their great work on these matters and convey to them the respect in which they are held by Labour Members, but I must repeat that this comes down to resources, not just for counter-terrorism as such but for community policing.

Amber Rudd: I thank the right hon. Lady for her questions. Let me say in response to her point about the run-up to the decision making on the Manchester attack that David Anderson also said that the decision made by MI5 at the different points during the run-up to that attack was “understandable”, based on the volume of intelligence that was coming through and the operational decisions that were made.

The right hon. Lady asked about the better sharing of data. There is already substantial sharing of data, but the report signals that more could be done. Learning from the actual attacks and from the attacks that have been foiled gives a particular momentum to that initiative. She also asked about the multi-agency pilots. For some years, people have been saying that we need to ensure that more information about closed subjects of interest, in particular, flows across local authority areas, and we are now addressing that head-on. Of course policing, particularly community policing, plays a key role, but there will also be interaction with health and education authorities. We want to work on pilots that address the multi-agency approach, so that we can collect information in a way that will not only support communities, but ensure that we have more information on the closed subjects of interest.
I would not want the right hon. Lady to imply that the report contains any suggestion that the attacks would not have taken place if there had been more resources. It is fine to ask about more resources, and I have acknowledged that more will be needed, but I should point out that in 2015 the Government recognised the need for more resources, and increased their investment in the counter-terrorism budgets from £11.7 billion to £15.1 billion in 2015-20 to ensure that this country, through this Government, is always properly resourced in that regard.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): It is a truism, but one that I think must sometimes be remembered, that we are in no position to guarantee 100% safety from terrorism for the population of this country. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary may agree with me that what we must strive to do is run a system of counter-terrorism and intelligence that is as efficient and effective as is humanly possible, so that we can provide as much protection as possible against the type of dreadful attack that we have seen in past months.

In that context, does my right hon. Friend agree that what appears to shine through the Anderson report is first that there is a high level of efficiency, which he was able to recognise, and secondly that there is a need for change in the way in which the work of the counter-terrorism agencies and MI5 is linked in the sharing of intelligence? The main focus of the Intelligence and Security Committee, of which I am Chairman, might most profitably be directed towards ensuring that that happens.

I assure my right hon. Friend that the Committee will undoubtedly review what has been done in considering what lessons are to be learnt. However, rather than just trying to reinvent the wheel in respect of what Mr Anderson has done, we will endeavour to establish whether we can maximise the efficiency of both services.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I indulged the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) with some latitude on account of both his senior position in the House and the fact that the statement had referred to him. May I very politely suggest to Members that they should always seek to imitate the eloquence of the learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) with his review of the implementation phase that will now take place. He is absolutely right to say that ensuring that the 126 recommendations are implemented during the next year is critical to the benefits that we can secure and the learning that we have as a result of the review. As David Anderson says in his report, making those changes could make a really significant difference in the future, potentially stopping attacks, but, as he also says, not necessarily stopping every attack.

Amber Rudd: I thank my right hon. and learned Lady makes an important point about the international nature of these matters. We have seen some of the examples that David Anderson reviewed, and international travel was one of the elements that led up to these attacks. It is incredibly important that we continue to have access to the systems that keep our people, and our people in Europe, safe. The best way to do that is to continue to have the sort of close relationship that we have with Europol and with other instruments such as the second generation Schengen information system—SIS II—and the European arrest warrant. That is why we have proposed a third-party warrant. That is why we have proposed a third-party treaty, through which we hope we can dock into the European Union and continue to work with EU countries to ensure that we keep their people and our people safe. I am hopeful that we will be able to arrive at such an agreement. Early indications from my conversations with other Home Secretaries across Europe are that we can do that, and I would say respectfully to Monsieur Barnier that I disagree with his interpretation that the UK is stepping away from keeping Europe safe. We remain just as committed to ensuring that we keep Europe safe, and that reflects the view of the Home Office and of the Government.

Mr Keith Simpson (Broadland) (Con): I am also a member of the Intelligence and Security Committee. I should like to ask the Home Secretary two questions. First, resources are obviously crucial, but this is also a matter of how our intelligence agencies are able to cope with the changing threat. Does she think that the agencies are capable of making that move? Secondly, we have had recommendations in the past, but they have not been implemented. How is she going to make certain that the recommendations in the Anderson report are implemented?

Amber Rudd: My right hon. Friend raises two important points. Yes, the intelligence agencies are capable of making those changes. They have done a thorough review themselves and, as David Anderson has said,
they have released information to him and been candid in their approach. They have shown themselves to be willing to embark on the changes that are needed. We all want to ensure that the recommendations are implemented, and I am pleased to say that David Anderson has agreed to participate in that. We will ensure that the review continues with external assurance from him. I also hope that my right hon. Friend’s Committee will play a role in ensuring that that implementation takes place.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I join the Home Secretary in condemning the terrorists who commit these vile attacks, and in extending our thoughts to the families affected. I also pay tribute to the work of MI5 and the police. They have very difficult judgments to make, and they do that with great integrity and expertise. I welcome their willingness to reflect on where there might have been an operational response that needed to change or to be improved, and we have to enable them to do that. I have already raised with the Home Secretary my concern about whether Salman Abedi should have been on watch lists. Can she tell me now, in the light of this report, what action she will take to ensure better co-operation between MI5 and the Border Force in all cases where suspects should be on watch lists?

Amber Rudd: I thank the right hon. Lady for her question. She is right to say that the security services have taken an unflinching look internally to see what they could do better, and I know that we all welcome that. This is an area that is covered in the report, and we must do better. We must have better alert systems relating to people coming and going, and ports alerts will be one area in which we will see a marked change.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): The shadow Secretary of State referred to resources, but that involves not only money but powers. I had the privilege of sitting on the Investigatory Powers Bill Committee. Does the Secretary of State think that the powers in that legislation have helped the security services to thwart the 22 attacks that she identified?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. and learned Friend for drawing attention to the important assistance that we can give to the security services and the police to enable them to keep us safe. She is right to say that the Investigatory Powers Act 2016 is crucial in that regard. We are also looking ahead to a new counter-terrorism Bill next year, to ensure that we can have additional, carefully thought-out powers to keep people safe, and I hope that the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) and her team will consider supporting that legislation, because keeping people safe should be our priority.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I strongly agree with the Home Secretary that all our thoughts are with those affected by and suffering from these vile crimes. In September, the Met Police Commissioner, Cressida Dick, said that counter-terrorism work “puts a strain not just on counter-terror police but neighbourhood officers and all our officers and staff”. Does the Home Secretary agree with the commissioner?

Amber Rudd: I bow to no one in the admiration I have for the work of the police in supporting counter-terrorism policing and the security services. Their work is a critical part of defending this country and dealing with counter-terrorism, and we recognise that the increase in the number of threats puts additional strain on them as well.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the Home Secretary’s statement, and particularly her reference to the evolving threat that might emerge as the caliphate that Daesh declared collapses. What work is she planning to do with our “Five Eyes” partners at international level to tackle that emerging threat?

Amber Rudd: That is an important point. A lot of the radicalisation of those people takes place online, which means that we need to take an international approach to ensure that more of that information is taken down, to stop people becoming radicalised. The “Five Eyes” have been leading on this, and the UK’s relationship with the US, in particular, has led to the first global internet forum for counter-terrorism being set up in the summer of last year. This is leading the way in ensuring that the sort of information we all want to see taken down is indeed removed.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The Home Secretary has rightly said that there has been an increase in attacks by right-wing extremists over the past 12 months. She said in her statement that she plans a new approach to domestic extremism, and I am sure that the Intelligence and Security Committee, on which I also sit, will look at that. Will she give us an indication today of how that new approach will manifest itself?

Amber Rudd: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question, and I know that he does great work on the ISC, which will provide important oversight of this report. One of its recommendations is that MI5 should oversee and engage with extreme right-wing terrorism in the same way that it does with international terrorism. That is the recommendation, and there are some clear implementations that go alongside it. We will be following that up, with his Committee and with the security services, to ensure that that takes place.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I, too, welcome today’s statement. One of its main planks relates to data, and that involves not only sharing data but checking for concerning activity. Will the Home Secretary tell us whether she is having talks with internet companies about their platforms being used for terrorist purposes?

Amber Rudd: This has come up on a number of occasions before. All of us in the House want the internet companies to do more to take down potentially radicalising material and to engage more with the security services by telling us when people are looking at material or are buying things that could help to make bombs. There is a lot more we can do with these companies, and I hope that they will engage with us to ensure we deliver on that.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): What more can we insist that the social media providers do, and what more do we have to do internationally? If we get this partnership
right, it will help greatly in defeating the terrorists. If we do not get it right, frankly, the social media providers will be negligent in their responsibilities and will ultimately be responsible for terrorist attacks and potential deaths.

Amber Rudd: That is a good point, which Governments are trying to make constantly to the social media companies. I am encouraged by the work so far, but in no way complacent. Today, Google announced it will be putting in additional investment, and many of the larger companies have said they are beginning to recruit many more people—hundreds, sometimes thousands. Critically, they are investing in machine-learning, so that the videos we all hate and do not want—the information that radicalises some young people—do not have to be seen in order to be taken down. We want the social media companies to invest in machine-learning and artificial intelligence so that this material can be taken down before it is seen.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement. Will she update the House on the Government’s work to combat the terrorist threat from extreme right-wing groups?

Amber Rudd: We want to stop all sorts of terrorism, including extreme right-wing terrorism. That is why I was the first Home Secretary to ban an extreme right-wing group last year, National Action, and I will make sure that we always proscribe groups where we have due cause to do so.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): The head of the German intelligence agency this week raised his concerns about those returning from Syria as the Daesh heartland is degraded. How confident is the Home Secretary that the important intelligence co-operation with Germany and our other European partners will continue into the future?

Amber Rudd: We share the concerns of most of my opposite numbers throughout Europe about returning foreign fighters. We are vigilant in making sure that, where we know they are coming back or have information on them, we track them, restrict them, monitor them if we can and stop them if we can, and we work very well across Europe with other partners to share information on that. I should also point out that on the intelligence side, a lot of the information shared is outside the EU, through the Counter Terrorism Group.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): It is right that the Government have increased funding for GCHQ, the Security Service and the Secret Intelligence Service. The Home Secretary mentioned announcing new police budgets soon. What can the Government do to encourage chief constables, city mayors, and police and crime commissioners in the West Mercia, West Midlands and Greater Manchester regions and elsewhere to ensure that those police budgets are targeted in such a way that they support regional and smaller Special Branch units, not just the national agencies?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is right: it is important not to lose sight of the local support and local impact that is needed. From 2015, we set up the counter-terrorism units, which are units that are based locally and have local information available to them and the sort of local community-based engagement that I know all Members expect.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): The Home Secretary and shadow Home Secretary are right that this House stands firmly in opposition to the terrorism that scarred Manchester and London earlier this year. In a welcome move, the Home Secretary has made resources available for the Greater Manchester Police to deal with the attack on Manchester Arena; will she now do the same for the Metropolitan police, because they might otherwise face a bill of up to £32 million, and that will mean fewer police officers going forward?

Amber Rudd: My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister was clear that we would make those resources available to Manchester, and we have done that. We will look carefully at the proposal from the Mayor of London, to see how we can assist. We will have to see the evidence first, but are likely to give the same sort of support.

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that our security services are second to none in being proactive through the use of initiatives such as Prevent, without which we would probably be far worse off?

Amber Rudd: That is an interesting point, and we do need to safeguard individuals who might become victims of radicalisation. The Prevent programme strives to do exactly that, and between 2015 and 2016 has diverted over 300 people through the Channel programme, who might otherwise have sought to do us harm on the streets.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): May I add my tribute to that of the Home Secretary, not least given the experiences in my constituency with Islamist and far-right extremism? As the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), said, concerns have been raised about individuals travelling in and out in the cases of both Salman Abedi and one of the alleged London Bridge attackers, who was apparently detained by the Italian authorities in Bologna, and that was reported to the UK. Will the Home Secretary say a little more about her plans to strengthen border checks and information sharing, particularly on exit, as well as on entry?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Gentleman is right: in those two attacks there is evidence of the attackers moving around, and, as is highlighted in the report, we need to do better at recording and communicating that information. It is crucial that that recommendation is implemented. The recommendation also dovetails with the general recommendation of better use of data. I hope that the ability to access such information more effectively and efficiently will prove to be one of the incremental improvements that will help to keep us safe.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): My right hon. Friend’s Department will have received a letter from west midlands mayor Andy Street on our police funding, which I hope she will consider appropriately. Will she
also ensure that local police forces, including mine in the west midlands, have all the resources they need to do their important counter-terrorism work?

Amber Rudd: Police budgets for 2018-19 will be set shortly, before Christmas. I reassure my hon. Friend that we will also always bear in mind police forces’ needs in dealing with counter-terrorism.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): I echo the tributes paid to the police and security services and the comprehensive report brought before the House today. I agree with the Home Secretary that data sharing is key. When information about Salman Abedi was flagged in early 2017, that was not shared with local police services. If it had been flagged with those on the ground, who perhaps had the fuller view of what was going on in the community, further action could perhaps have been taken.

On resources, I echo what has been said: the frontline of counter-terrorism is community police, and also youth services, community groups, charities and others who operate on the frontline. We need a holistic view of that.

On the costs incurred, in Greater Manchester in particular, I thank the Home Secretary for making sure that the policing budget will be fully reimbursed, and thank her colleague, the hon. Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy), for working with me to make sure that was the case. Can we make sure that we never have to ask again, and that it will from now on just be something that is done automatically?

Amber Rudd: I agree with much of what the hon. Lady said, but would point out that it is not just about policing, important though policing and community policing are; it is about the wider community as well, which is why we are approaching this differently and saying that we want to have a multiagency approach. We will be trialling that—including in Manchester, we hope—so that we can work out how best to yield the information in a supportive, positive way, so that we have better ears and eyes on the ground. I hope the hon. Lady will engage with us positively to support that.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): Hampshire police recently undertook anti-terrorism training at its headquarters in Hamble in my constituency. It was absolutely fascinating and deeply reassuring for my constituents, and it highlighted the cross-border work with Thames Valley police following what happened in London and Manchester. Will the Home Secretary also consider the marine threat around the Solent and the risk of threat coming over the water, ensuring that that is highlighted in any approach that she takes to counter-terrorism?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend raises an important point. It is reassuring to hear of her positive experience of the training, but we are of course looking at what more we can do in the marine environment. We work closely with Border Force to ensure that we always stay on top of evolving crime, and I hope that we can continue to make progress there, as we do in other areas.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): The Home Secretary will be well aware of the serious continuing threat from dissident republicans in Northern Ireland. We also have no Assembly and no Justice Minister. When she reviews the finances of the police forces that have to tackle terrorism, I urge the Home Secretary, for whom I have enormous regard, to give the Police Service of Northern Ireland additional funding for its counter-terrorism role. The other budgets are controlled by the Assembly, but PSNI should have further funding for that role.

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady makes such an important point. I am of course aware of the ongoing terrorist attacks, which we take as seriously as any terrorism throughout the country. I also take seriously her point about ensuring that there is sufficient funding.

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): The Home Secretary talked about the process that authorities follow when new intelligence becomes available about closed subjects of interest. Will she say what, if any, changes have been made to that process over the past six months?

Amber Rudd: I reassure the hon. Lady that this is not a case of stopping or pausing, doing a review and making changes. As is shown in David Anderson’s report, a copy of which I have just put in the Library, MI5 has already started to make many changes, one of which relates to ports alerts, as mentioned by several hon. Members today. We are already ensuring that action is being taken to make improvements, as set out in the report.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): With British combatants already arriving back on these shores after having fought for Daesh in Iraq and Syria, will the Home Secretary fast-track the new terrorism Bill? Will she consider including a reversal of this Government’s decision to permanently lower the limit on pre-charge detention to 14 days? The whole House will agree with the Government’s position that such people should face trial, but is there not a significant danger that many will be allowed to roam free in their communities while the Government and law enforcement agencies build a case against them?

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his support for the counter-terrorism Bill. We have already announced several changes that we will be bringing forward in that legislation to ensure, for example, that we have tougher sentencing so that convicted terrorists stay away for longer and that not just streaming, but downloading radicalisation videos online will also be a criminal offence. The hon. Gentleman’s last point is interesting, and I will have to come back to him on that, but I welcome his support for a CT Bill, because I am not convinced that I will get it from the entire Opposition. I will single him out as someone who supports us.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The Home Secretary has to accept that £1 billion-worth of cuts to the Metropolitan police has had an impact on counter-terrorism. She said that she intends to increase funding for counter-terrorism, but will she guarantee that that will not come at the expense of essential community policing?
Amber Rudd: I caution the hon. Gentleman on suggesting that resources are in any way to blame for the attacks this year—the ones that were foiled and the ones that were not. If he takes a careful look at the document—it has only just been placed in the Library, so I suspect he has not seen it yet—he will see clear recommendations and issues that are not specific to resources. We recognise that there has been an upshift, as David Anderson called it, or change in the number of attacks that we are seeing in this country, and that will require not only a change in powers—the CT Bill that we have proposed—but potential additional resources.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Every Greater Manchester MP, Mayor Andy Burnham and Richard Leese, the leader of the city council, have signed a joint letter to the Chairman of the Intelligence and Security Committee expressing our concern that Salman Abedi’s name was shared with our colleagues in America and subsequently leaked, placing Chief Constable Ian Hopkins and the investigation in an intolerable situation. Does the Home Secretary share our deep concern about that?

Amber Rudd: Many of us—not least my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister—raised that issue with our opposite numbers, and such leaks are completely unwelcome and inappropriate. However, we must not underestimate our incredibly important close relationship with the US on intelligence sharing and support, and we must be cautious of any eventuality that might endanger that relationship. That sort of close intelligence sharing saves lives in this country.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Every day, we are bombarded with a torrent of hate-filled, intolerant and sometimes downright violent language from the pages of mainstream newspapers and websites and elsewhere. Does the Home Secretary agree that that in itself is a form of non-violent extremism? Does she believe that we have the right balance between respecting free speech and freedom of expression and preventing those freedoms from being abused in a way that inevitably incites others to convert violent words into violent actions?

Amber Rudd: Whether we have the right balance is a very big question indeed. From a legislative point of view, we will always look carefully at what is inspiring people to take violent action and, where we can, we will take action against it, such as proscribing National Action. It is critical that we remember the victims and their families, who are the ones who suffer following attacks, and we will take whatever action we can to ensure that they are well supported, which they always will be under this Government.
2.28 pm

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): I beg to move.

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make it an offence to attack service animals, including police dogs and horses; to make certain offences aggravated when perpetrated against such animals; and for connected purposes.

I am asking for leave to bring in a Bill containing what is known as Finn’s law, which arises from the experience of police dog Finn and his handler, my constituent Police Constable Dave Wardell from Buntingford. When on duty in the neighbouring town of Stevenage, PC Wardell and Finn were called to an incident involving a robbery suspect. He started to run and they followed. Eventually, the suspect hid in a garden and Finn was searching for him when a garden light came on and lit him up. PC Wardell shouted for him to stop, but the male jumped up a fence and, at this, Finn took hold of his lower leg and restrained him.

As PC Wardell looked down, he saw the man lunge forward towards Finn’s chest with a hunting knife with a blade about ten inches long. Finn was stabbed in the chest with the full length. The dog stayed to protect his handler, and PC Wardell remonstrated with the man, who replied, “What do you expect?” The man then lunged forward with the knife, this time not towards Finn but up towards the officer’s head. The officer did not have time to react but Finn did, lifting his head and putting himself between his handler and the knife. Due to Finn’s actions, the knife sliced open Finn’s head and cut PC Wardell’s hand. The officer believes that, by this action, Finn saved his life.

Other officers arrived, and the offender was taken under police control. Finn was badly injured and bleeding, and he was immediately taken in the dog van on blue lights first to a local vet and then to a specialist in chest injuries. Despite everything that was going on, and despite all the pain he was in, Finn started tending to the officer’s wound by licking it. Finn was struggling to breathe, his lungs punctured in four places. He later underwent four hours of surgery.

The incident happened in the early hours of Wednesday 5 October 2016. Finn made a remarkable recovery, with the vet commenting on his bravery and spirit. Three days later, the vet was able to remove the drains from Finn’s chest before sending him home to recover. PC Wardell slept downstairs at home with Finn for the next four weeks.

From being close to death, Finn started back training after eight weeks and, by week 11, Finn and PC Wardell were ready to start their first shift. They went back to work on 22 December 2016 for a night shift. On his very first job, Finn put his nose to the ground and found the scent of a fleeing suspect. He tracked until he found the suspect hiding, perhaps appropriately, in a stable block—it was a starry night three days before Christmas.

I have met Finn, and he is an amazing dog. Recently retired, he is one of the most successful dogs Hertfordshire police has ever had. PC Wardell feels privileged to have been his partner for seven years. Finn is action animal of the year. Finn’s story, his bravery and his desire to work are not unusual. There are 1,200 police dogs in the UK. They get kicked, punched and strangled, but rarely in a charge brought because of a gap in the law. It is difficult to shoehorn such criminal circumstances into the available offences.

When it came to charging the offender in Finn’s case, there was an offence of assault occasioning actual bodily harm of the officer, but there were only two potential charges for the injuries to Finn himself: causing unnecessary suffering to an animal, contrary to section 4 of the Animal Welfare Act 2006; or a charge under section I of the Criminal Damage Act 1971. Neither offence really captures the seriousness of an attack on a service animal, where the animal is part of a law enforcement team acting in accordance with duty and the attack aims to prevent the apprehension of a suspect, to evade the law or to remove protection from a police officer in dangerous circumstances.

Equally, where an animal is providing a vital service to a person with a disability, the seriousness of an attack is not simply in the damage to the animal but in the effect it has on the person reliant on the animal’s service. To accept such attacks on animals as just damage to property is distasteful.

My hon. Friend the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service, who is in his place, said in correspondence with me that it is “unpalatable to think of police animals as ‘equipment’, as inferred in a charge of criminal damage”.

He promised that the Home Office will continue to work with the police on this issue. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has said that he will investigate what more might be done.

There are legal problems with the current offences. For offences under section 4 of the Animal Welfare Act there is a defence of acting in response to a fear of harm from an animal. Of course, there is no recognition in the offence of the role of a service animal. The mental element of offences under section I of the Criminal Damage Act—what is the offender’s intent?—has also posed difficulties. The courts have also found difficulty in quantifying damage to animals. Normally with criminal damage it is a question of the financial value of the damage that has been done, but a seven or eight-year-old police dog is not that valuable in monetary terms. Retired police dog Finn’s injuries could not have been more serious but, when it came to sentencing, the offender was sent to custody for the offence of assault occasioning actual bodily harm—the court felt that Finn’s injuries were insufficiently serious to warrant a separate penalty.

There are new sentencing guidelines, but they do not resolve the problems of establishing a primary offence and quantifying the damage. Finn’s case suggests that the courts struggle with that. My proposal is to follow countries such as Canada, where the Justice for Animals in Service Act is now in force.

The Bill I am proposing would create a clear offence of attacking a service animal, triable either way, with appropriate sentences and a maximum of five years’ imprisonment on conviction by a Crown court. The term “service animals” provides sufficient scope to include not only animals in public service, such as police dogs and horses, but guide dogs and assistance dogs that help those with disabilities.
We are lucky in Britain to have fantastic and brave service animals like Finn, but there is a gap in the law. These animals should not be treated as equipment, but as what they really are: key members of the law enforcement team and providers of essential services. It is time for Finn's law.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Sir Oliver Heald, Sir Roger Gale, Sir Paul Beresford, David Hanson, John Spellar, Mr Ben Bradshaw, Neil Parish, Gareth Thomas, Jack Lopresti, Maggie Throup, Mr Nigel Evans and Jim Fitzpatrick, present the Bill.

Sir Oliver Heald accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 February 2018, and to be printed (Bill 138).

Opposition Day

[6TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Universal Credit Project Assessment Reviews

2.38 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I beg to move, That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, That she will be graciously pleased to give directions that the five project assessment reviews, carried out into universal credit between 2012 and 2015 by the Government’s Major Projects Authority now known as the Infrastructure and Projects Authority, and any subsequent project assessment reviews carried out into universal credit by the Infrastructure and Projects Authority between 1 January 2016 and 30 November 2017 that have been provided to Her Majesty’s Ministers at the Department for Work and Pensions, be provided by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to the Work and Pensions Committee.

The purpose of today’s debate on universal credit, the fourth in nearly eight weeks, is to seek the release of the project assessment review reports on universal credit to enable this House to scrutinise the Government’s flagship social security programme.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): The hon. Lady has just said that this is the fourth debate in eight weeks. Can she clarify whether she asked for the documents in any of those four debates, or indeed on any other occasion in this House?

[Interruption.]

Debbie Abrahams: As some of my colleagues are saying, we are asking for the documents now. We are pleased the Government finally acknowledged that their universal credit programme is not fit for purpose, and now we need to understand the extent to which it is not fit for purpose through the publication of these reports.

I wish to start by giving some context to today’s debate and then set out why it is so important that we have access to these project assessment reviews. For many months now, Labour has been calling on the Government to pause and fix universal credit. This is a direct response to the mounting evidence that the full service programme is driving hardship in the areas where it has been rolled out. I am sure hon. Members from across the House will now be aware of the figures, but the realities of the misery being caused by this programme bear repeating: half of those in rent arrears under UC report that their arrears started after they made their claim; 79% of those in debt are recognised as having priority debts by Citizens Advice, putting them at higher risk of bailiffs and evictions; and two in five have no money to pay creditors at the end of the month.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend aware of research published today by the Residential Landlords Association on this point, which found that 73% of landlords remain reluctant to let properties to people on UC? That is vital context. We need to understand what the Government know about the pressure on landlords in the context of UC.

Debbie Abrahams: Absolutely. My hon. Friend makes such a pertinent point. I was going on to say that demand for emergency food parcels in areas where
UC has been rolled out is up 30%. Disabled people, single parents and families with children have been particularly affected. Initially, the Government’s impact assessments said that UC would reduce child poverty by 350,000, but then it was to be by 150,000. Now, the Child Poverty Action Group has estimated that by 2022 an additional 1 million children will have been pushed into poverty by as a direct result of cuts to UC. We have identified three drivers for these widespread problems: policy design issues; implementation flaws; and funding cuts.

As I have mentioned, at the recent Budget the Chancellor was forced to respond to Labour’s concerns about UC, as well as concerns from across the House—I acknowledge everybody’s work on this. As I said in my response to the Secretary of State’s statement on this, the measures in the Budget are welcome, not least in finally acknowledging that UC was not fit for purpose. But they are not nearly urgent enough, as they do not come into effect until next year; they do not address key issues, such as the assessment and payment periods or the single household payment; and fundamentally they do not redress the cuts and restore work incentives. Only £1 in every £10 that has been cut has been restored. Though he refused to pause the programme, as we had demanded, the roll-out of UC has been slowed considerably, meaning that the roll-out to all jobcentres will now not be completed until December 2018.

That brings us to the project assessment review reports and today’s motion. Five reviews on UC were carried out by the then Major Projects Authority between 2012 and 2015. As Members know, such reviews are independent ones that provide assurance to major projects. They contain in-depth analysis of the implementation of the project, including detailed assessment of the risks faced and the progress that has been achieved against the Government’s objective: to deliver their flagship social security programme, universal credit. Although these review reports have never been made public, the National Audit Office’s report on UC in 2013 stated that “the Major Projects Authority’s project assessment review expressed serious concerns about the Department having no detailed ‘blueprint’ and transition plan for Universal Credit. In response to these concerns, the head of the Major Projects Authority was asked to conduct a 13-week ‘reset’ between February and May 2013”.

In other words, it was clear that all was not well even then. The announcement of a “reset” was buried in the MPA annual report of that year, accompanied by a single sentence of explanation. This is how UC has limped on ever since.

To try to uncover the extent of the issues, freedom of information requests were submitted to the Government to access these project assessment reviews; but they were refused. The doughty campaigners appealed to the Information Commissioner, and on 30 August this year, the Information Commissioner’s Office ruled that this information must be disclosed by the Department in full, with the exception of the names of the civil servants named in the reports. The ICO’s judgment is important and worth reflecting on here.

Debbie Abrahams: Absolutely. My hon. Friend makes such as a good point. This is what we have been calling for all along. We need to have an in-depth understanding of what the real issues are. We have outlined a number of those, but it is clear that the programme contains deep flaws. If we are serious about resolving these problems—I believe the Secretary of State is genuine in his offer to do so—we must understand exactly what the extent of the problems are.

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Lady referred to the decision of the Information Commissioner, rightly saying that there was a limitation in that the names of non-senior officials were not disclosed. However, there were two other things in that decision. First, there was an acceptance that it was reasonable to argue that routine disclosure of PAR reports would reduce their effectiveness. Secondly, and more importantly, it was stated that they were disclosed because six months had passed since the reports had been put together and therefore officials could feel that they had been able to give free and frank advice. But six months has not passed since the date of the reports that the hon. Lady has requested in this motion.

Debbie Abrahams: I do not think that gets a way from the ultimate ruling, which was that these things should be published. I understand exactly what the hon. and learned Lady is saying, but at the end of the day the ICO ruled that these PAR reports must be published.

Jamie Stone: I make no apologies for raising this point repeatedly in this place. In a rural and remote constituency such as mine, the lack of ability for people to link up online is surely impeding any roll-out of UC. I am sure the hon. Lady recognises that, and the issue has to be taken on by Her Majesty’s Government. Meanwhile, it is of great concern in my constituency.

Debbie Abrahams: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point. Again, we need to know the extent of the issues. I am sure the information system is one of those concerns. The Information Commissioner described the PARs as giving “a much greater insight than any information already available about the Universal Credit Programme.”

James Cartlidge: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Debbie Abrahams: I am going to finish this point. The ICO describes the programme as having “been subject to a number of high-profile failings”. In its judgment, the ICO weighed the public interest carefully and determined that the balance supports disclosure of these five reports, not least because UC could affect up to 11 million people, by the estimation of the ICO, with nearly 7 million relying on the programme once it is fully rolled out. The commissioner noted that

Jo Platt: My local authority, Wigan Council, was part of the pilot for UC, which subsequently caused rent arrears, payment delays and increasing financial pressures on the local authority. Does my hon. Friend agree that if these project assessment reviews had been released when the Information Commissioner ruled, the Government could have paused the flawed UC system, thus preventing undue hardship for my constituents?
the Department for Work and Pensions had not complied with the law in its handling of the original request for information and gave it 35 days to release this information into the public domain, with a failure to comply resulting in a written certification to the High Court. So we cannot underestimate the importance of this ruling.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): Nobody is more interested than I am in universal credit and in its being a success. Does the hon. Lady acknowledge that even if we do get the reports, because the roll-out has been very slow—I am glad it has—some of them are really old and the system has been significantly improved since then? They might give us a window into the past, but I sense that they will not give the opportunity that she is hoping for to identify flaws in the system, because I think we have fixed a lot of them.

Debbie Abrahams: But we do not know, do we? I recognise the hon. Lady’s commitment and drive—

James Cartlidge: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Debbie Abrahams: May I just finish responding to the intervention?

We need to understand what is in the reports. I absolutely understand the commitment of the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) on this issue, but we do not know until we have seen them.

James Cartlidge: This is all fine, but the key stats are in the public domain. The purpose of universal credit is to help people into work. We have record employment and record low unemployment. Those are the stats that matter. Does the hon. Lady celebrate them?

Debbie Abrahams: Well, where to start with that? First, unless the hon. Gentleman has a crystal ball and has been able to read the reports, I do not think he is in a position to say that they will reveal nothing else. Secondly, on the stats he mentioned, I think there is enough on the record to refute those points.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government’s insistence on cloaking this project in secrecy, right from the start, has been one reason why it has gone so badly wrong?

Debbie Abrahams: My right hon. Friend hits the nail on the head. We must have greater openness and transparency about this and other Government schemes. For universal credit especially, the effect it is having on people now means that we must do the right thing. As I said, the ruling must be complied with.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): rose—

Debbie Abrahams: I shall give way in a moment.

As the ICO ruled, any failure to publish the reports does not detract from the valuable work that the universal credit programme—

But we do not know, do we? I understand that, regrettably, the Government have appealed the ruling and are awaiting the outcome of a first tribunal hearing. This is the second time—

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Debbie Abrahams: I am just going to carry on for a moment, if that is all right.

This is the second time in two years that I have brought to the House’s attention Information Commissioner rulings concerning the DWP that the Government have tried to thwart. The first time was when the Government refused to publish data on the number of people who had died after being found fit for work. Those data were shocking and vindicated those who had pushed for their release for several years. They gave cold comfort for the families and friends of those who had died and to those who were still going through the assessment process.

I appreciate that neither universal credit nor the project assessment review reports were initiated under the tenure of the current Secretary of State, but I do urge him to rethink and publish the reports forthwith. Taxpayers’ money must not be used to hide the Government’s embarrassment.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): When the only impact assessment of universal credit we have seen was published five years ago this month, it committed to a post-implementation review within five years and said:

“A comprehensive evaluation programme is being developed for Universal Credit”

to inform and evaluate long-term policy. Are we not now trying to get some crumbs of the evidence the Government committed to providing five years ago and should have provided?

Debbie Abrahams: My hon. Friend makes absolutely the right point. I commend her for her work on the Work and Pensions Committee to expose how important it is to get this right.

Justin Tomlinson: The hon. Lady is being generous in taking interventions. On the point about transparency, each and every single one of us can at any time visit jobcentres and talk to staff and claimants. I have done that three times and brought a Minister with me to visit, too. The overwhelming response I have had is that universal credit is positive and is making a genuine difference.

Debbie Abrahams: I thoroughly agree with the hon. Gentleman that our seeking the publication of these reports does not detract from the valuable work that jobcentre staff are doing under difficult circumstances.

The Information Commissioner’s Office found that “the withheld information would provide valuable insight into the management of the UCP”—

universal credit programme—

“and allow for greater understanding of what the UCP did to identify and tackle the issues that it encountered.”

It found that the reports we are discussing “provide a distinct insight into the governance of the UCP and allow for even greater transparency.”
That is in addition to the findings in National Audit Office, Select Committee and Office for Budget Responsibility reports.

The Government’s Budget announcements were a welcome step in the right direction, but not nearly enough. They still need to pause the roll-out of universal credit, not just slow it down, and they need to release the project assessment reviews so that we can fix the multitude of issues that still exist. The reports will help us to understand what needs fixing and how.

Wendy Morton: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Debbie Abrahams: I am sorry, but I am going to continue.

If the Government are so sure that a slow-down will suffice, that they can continue to ignore work incentives, that no changes are necessary before Christmas and that a five-week wait is sufficient, why will they not publish their own workings, as the Information Commissioner has instructed? It is a clear matter of public interest that the Government abide by the ruling of the Information Commissioner and publish five assessment reviews, and any others in the subsequent period. That will allow the House the proper scrutiny it deserves and shine a light on the implementation failures of the universal credit programme, which have caused so much hardship for so many. I call on the Government to abide by that ruling now.

2.56 pm

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mr David Gauke): Let me deal first with the motion. The challenge for any Government—and, one would think, for any aspiring Government—is to strike the right balance between transparency, and encouraging candid evaluation and debate. There is a reason why project assessment reports commissioned by the Infrastructure and Projects Authority, and formerly the Major Projects Authority, have not been released by Governments. The Public Accounts Committee has already recognised that there is a need to protect information that is commercially sensitive, and for there to be a safe space for candid evaluation and debate. The assessments we are discussing represent an important period of reflection and, by their very nature, are useful only if everyone involved is able to offer their views freely and frankly to evaluate fairly the project on which they are working. Ultimately, this is about protecting the interests of the taxpayer.

Successive Governments have continued to improve project delivery. The PAC supported the creation of the Major Projects Authority, and its objectives of strengthening project assurance and improving the transparency of information on the costs, risks and performance of major Government projects. The PAC recognised the challenge that Government face in improving project delivery within government. Supporting all that is the rigorous scrutiny of individual projects by the National Audit Office, with full access to all papers.

Parliament has consistently directed the Government to manage projects professionally, more efficiently and effectively, and with due consideration for commercial imperatives. Consequently, I hope there is a consensus that the disclosure of information beyond the existing well-established and robust transparency policy that the PAC supports must not undermine the integrity and validity of the review process, risk weakening our commercial negotiating position, or expose us to possible legal challenge.

Stephen Timms: The Secretary of State refers to the National Audit Office, which he will know at one stage characterised the universal credit project as having a “good news” culture in which staff were not allowed to acknowledge and draw attention to problems. Does he agree that that should not have prevailed? Will he reassure the House that that culture has been dealt with?

Mr Gauke: I very much agree about the importance of a culture in which problems can be identified and passed up the command chain, with that system understood across the board. Clearly, when that does not happen, something needs to be addressed. When I entered this House in 2005—the right hon. Gentleman was a Minister at the time—we were wrestling with the problems of the tax credit fiasco, which was causing misery for vast numbers of people. If Members want an example of a project that failed because there was not a willingness to identify problems early, that is it.

The Infrastructure and Projects Authority’s policy that review reports remain confidential is founded on the position that an effective and trusted system of assurance in government is in the public interest, and that the premature disclosure of review reports undermines that public interest. Those considerations must be balanced with the desire for transparency and parliamentary scrutiny. In exceptional cases, sharing information with a Select Committee, in confidence, can be appropriate.

The motion refers to a number of reports, many of which date back some years, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) pointed out. To disclose those papers without subsequent reports showing how well universal credit has progressed would give a partial picture. In line with the motion, I will provide, by the time the House rises for the Christmas recess, the reports directly to the Work and Pensions Committee. Let me point out to the shadow Secretary of State that her motion does not require us to publish these reports or to lay them before the House. Specifically, it says that those reports should be provided to the Committee. In those circumstances, it is acceptable for us to do so. As is customary, I will need to consider redacting any appropriate material, such as the names of junior officials and information that is commercially sensitive. I wish to emphasise that it is the Government’s view that this is an exceptional request that will be agreed to on an exceptional basis, and does not set any precedent for future action. Against that background, I shall provide the reports to the Select Committee on a confidential basis. In those circumstances, I hope and expect that the documents will not be disclosed further.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): The Secretary of State has hit on a very important distinction between the motion that we are debating today and the one about Brexit documents. That motion said that the documents should be made available to the Brexit Committee and then laid before the House. Today’s motion does not say that; it says that the reports should
be given to the Work and Pension Committee. We are not a Committee of Privy Counsellors. We have never been in a position like this before so, if I catch your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to develop this theme, because we are in totally new constitutional waters. The motion, which has now been accepted—we can all go home in a minute, or bring on the next business—is different, and puts us in a different constitutional position than the one that was outlined for the Brexit Committee.

Mr Gauke: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I can only assume that those who tabled the motion worded it carefully. They chose its wording on the basis that it was about providing information to the Work and Pensions Committee. As I have said, I do believe that, in these circumstances and for the reasons that I have set out, the Select Committee will treat this matter confidentially, but he is absolutely right to draw attention to that distinction.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for pointing out the collective amnesia of some about the fiasco of tax credits, although I am absolutely sure that many Conservative Members have not forgotten it. I was told by my Jobcentre Plus staff, who have been training Basingstoke Jobcentre Plus staff, that this extremely agile system allows them to feed in impacts and changes, and to listen and to learn. The Government are doing this because it is right for everybody.

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend hits the nail on the head. That is exactly how we are rolling out universal credit, which is why we are able to make changes and why the process is being done gradually. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire pointed out, these reports go back some years, since when there have been a number of changes. At one level, I would love to be able to publish the most recent IPA report because it makes it very clear that we were right to expand the roll-out of universal credit in the autumn. I am not publishing it, however, so in effect, I am tying one hand behind my back, because I respect the principle that these reports as a whole should not be published. None the less, in accordance with the motion, I am prepared to provide the reports to the Select Committee.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): The Secretary of State is very generous in giving way. He says that he is unhappy that he cannot publish the most up-to-date report, because it would give the Government—I am paraphrasing here—a glowing report card. I wonder what was assessed. Is he not aware that housing providers, housing associations and others say that every single one of their tenants who has moved on to universal credit is now in arrears or has increased rent arrears? Is he not aware of what is actually happening on the ground? I would like him to publish that report, because it would contradict everything that all of us on the Opposition Benches are seeing in our communities.

Mr Gauke: Let me turn to the substance of universal credit. Universal credit is the biggest modernisation of the welfare state in a generation. The old system traps people in a cycle of benefits dependency, incentivising working only 16 hours or fewer a week and preventing people from reaching their potential. Universal credit frees people from those hours limits and lets them keep more of what they earn. Under universal credit, people are moving into work faster and staying in work longer than under the previous system. Once universal credit is fully rolled out, it will boost employment by around 250,000, which is equivalent to 400 extra jobs per constituency. It is improving the welfare system and the lives of those who use it.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): My right hon. Friend was talking about transparency. One thing that we do know for certain is that, in each constituency, 400 people are able to go back to work when they are on universal credit. The new system helps people back into work. There is nothing more demoralising for people than to be told to lower their gaze, stay in line, stay on welfare, and not even to try to go for a job, because the risk is too great that if they try to secure a job, they might lose their benefit. If people lose their job, the palaver of getting their benefits back can be incredibly demoralising and time-consuming.

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One problem with the legacy system is that it does not cope with those people whose hours might fluctuate below and above 16 hours. The difficulties of moving from one regime to another can discourage people from taking extra hours. That is why it is so disappointing that we do not have cross-party support for these reforms. The Labour party has consistently called on us to pause and fix universal credit. It has done it again today, but in doing so, it has, on more than one occasion, resorted to scaremongering. It is increasingly clear that when it says pause and fix, it means scrap and wind to the failed system of the past.

Ruth George: If the Minister is so convinced of all the facts about universal credit that he claims, why does he not release the post-implementation review that the Department was apparently putting together and give us the full details of how universal credit is working, instead of relying on a study of a tiny sample of single people without jobs that was conducted more than two years ago, before the cuts, in order to make these wild claims?

Mr Gauke: What we have released is analytically robust. It enables us to compare with a matched sample, which becomes harder to do as there are fewer single people on jobseeker’s allowance. The reality is that the evidence points to universal credit getting people back into work quicker and ensuring that people are more likely to progress in work.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): We have had a number of debates about the roll-out of universal credit throughout the autumn. Government Ministers, including the Secretary of State, said from the outset and subsequently that the system was working fine and going very well indeed, but they recently made a number of concessions. If everything was working so well, why did they make any concessions at all?

Mr Gauke: Before any of the policies we announced at the Budget, universal credit was a better system than the legacy system. I am delighted that we are going even further to ensure that universal credit becomes a better system, and we will continue to do so.
Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Is it not also critical that we send out clear and accurate messages? Can we put to rest the myth that if a claim is made today, it will not be possible to get benefits before Christmas? Is it not the case that advance payments mean that people can get the payments they need on time? This is a humane system.

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend is exactly right. He highlights just one of the examples of what we have heard from the shadow Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. She said in *The Times* on 28 November that new claimants would not receive any money before Christmas, and that anyone claiming universal credit in 2018 would “wait five weeks for any support”. That is simply not accurate.

Under universal credit, any claimants can access support within days. Advances are currently available at 50%. They will be available at 100% in the new year, effectively providing a full payment within five days if that is what the claimant wants. Let us draw a contrast. If people were going on to jobseeker’s allowance, they might enrol several weeks before Christmas but receive no money until after Christmas.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): The Secretary of State has announced the partial publication of these reports. Of course, the fact remains that there is a live case from the Information Commissioner’s Office. Will he confirm whether he will release these reports to John Slater, who has campaigned for them?

Mr Gauke: We will continue with due process on that. I have said today that I will comply with the motion, which requires us not to publish the reports, but to provide them to the Work and Pensions Committee.

Alex Chalk: Gloucester City Homes.

Mr Gauke: I will come to that one.

Let me give another example of scaremongering. On Friday, *The Daily Mirror* ran a piece about a woman who had been scared by all the media and political attacks on universal credit. She was so worried about her universal credit payments being stopped that she felt that she would have to cancel Christmas. Thankfully, we looked at her case. It turned out that the family’s universal credit payment for December would be £20 lower than that for November, but that the family’s total income and earnings alongside universal credit would be higher this month than last month. The conclusion is clear: the Opposition’s irresponsible scaremongering is causing unnecessary anxiety for people who are getting support from the system as they should. Let me give another example.

Alex Chalk: Gloucester City Homes.

Mr Gauke: I will come to that one.

The shadow Secretary of State has promoted the BBC “Money Box” piece that suggested that 100,000 people would lose their benefits over Christmas. The BBC subsequently apologised for the story and admitted that it was misleading. Will the hon. Lady do the same? I am happy to give way to her if she wants me to. She also suggested in *The Times* that only 600,000 people would receive the housing benefit transitional payment. I was clear in the House on 23 November that all of the 2.3 million people currently on housing benefit would be eligible. Will the hon. Lady therefore retract her assertion?

Let us not forget—my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) has clearly not forgotten—that the Leader of the Opposition suggested that Gloucester City Homes had “evicted one in eight of…its tenants”—[Official Report, 11 October 2017, Vol. 629, c. 324.]

One in eight is 650 people. In fact, eight people on universal credit had been evicted by Gloucester City Homes, and all had significant debt arrears before universal credit was introduced. One had moved out of their property 18 months earlier and another had moved abroad. I hope that the shadow Secretary of State will take the opportunity to correct the record and apologise on behalf of the Leader of the Opposition.

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): We have had a number of conversations about the roll-out of universal credit, which in fact started in my constituency six or seven weeks ago when we first debated the issue. Some 148 claimants have gone through the system in my constituency. I speak to them regularly, and I also speak to everybody involved in dealing with vulnerable people around my constituency. So far, universal credit has been successful, and people very much welcome what was done in the Budget to ensure that as we change the system, it will be flexible, and something that looks after people positively and helps them to move back into work. I thank the Secretary of State for what he has done.

Mr Gauke: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for highlighting the experience in her constituency. Members of Parliament have a role in ensuring that people are aware of the advances system and the support that is available. That is the responsible role for us to play, instead of trying to scare people with concerns that do not necessarily materialise.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Since 2013—as leader of the Highland Council and then as an MP—I have been reporting the difficulties of rent arrears. Rent arrears with the Highland Council are now approaching £2 million, and a number of people have been put directly into rent arrears due to universal credit. We have invited the Secretary of State to come to Inverness to hear about this directly. In the light of what he said, will he now come to the highlands and hear about the experiences of rent arrears since 2013?

Mr Gauke: Let me assure the House that I visit many parts of the country to see how universal credit is operating. The response I get back, which is consistent with the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), is that it is working on the ground, providing more support to people, and giving jobcentres better tools with which to help people into work.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Gauke: Let me make a little bit of progress.

In the autumn Budget, the Chancellor announced a comprehensive package of improvements to put more money into claimants’ hands earlier and to ensure that there is extra support for those who need it most. This month, new guidance will be issued to staff to ensure that claimants in the private rented sector who currently have their housing benefit paid directly to landlords will
be offered that option when they join universal credit. In January, we are making changes to advances by extending the recovery period from six months to 12 months, and increasing the amount of support a claimant can receive to up to 100% interest-free. In addition, from spring next year, we will be making it possible to apply for an advance online. From February, we are removing the seven-day waiting period. From April, we are providing an additional two weeks of payment to new claimants already receiving housing benefit as they transition on to universal credit, which, for the avoidance of doubt, will benefit 2.3 million people.

Jamie Stone: I know that I am beginning to sound like a stuck record, but the Secretary of State talks about doing things online. I am a new Member—I am not a Privy Counsellor; I do not go to these smart Committees—but I still have the problem that there are people in my vast and remote constituency who cannot go online. This is a big problem. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with the Scottish Government about trying to get broadband rolled out exactly where we need it?

Mr Gauke: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point about broadband roll-out, which obviously, as he knows, is not my responsibility. I understand that there are significant concerns about how that is progressing. It is the case that jobcentres provide the ability for people to complete forms, and they can also provide information about the availability of wi-fi.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): My right hon. Friend touched on the measures announced in the Budget. Does he agree that this £1.5 billion has been found to prioritise help where it is most needed in our society? Given the pressures on the public finances, that demonstrates that this Government really care about getting this right for the people who really need it.

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend puts it very well. We are determined to deliver this policy successfully and to ensure that it helps more people to have better opportunities. That is what universal credit is about. That is why we have allocated £8 million over four years to conduct a number of tests and trials to support the development of evidence about what works to help people progress in work—this is about not just getting into work, but progressing in work.

This comprehensive package responds to concerns raised inside and outside the House. Our clear objective is to ensure that as many people as possible get the opportunity to work and to maximise their potential to better their circumstances. This is Labour Members’ last Opposition day of the year, and what have they achieved?

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): We got what we asked for—the report published.

Mr Gauke: We are not publishing reports, but we have been able to highlight the inaccurate scaremongering by the Labour party. We have underlined the benefits of the policies announced in the Budget. We have underlined the wholehearted support for universal credit among Conservative Members, and we have further confirmed Labour’s position as a roadblock to welfare reform—seeking not to pause and fix, but to scrap and rewind.

As the evidence builds that universal credit is positively transforming lives, it will become clearer and clearer that Labour Front Benchers are on the wrong side of the argument. So I say this to whoever had the idea for the debate: thank you, because I welcome the chance to argue the case for universal credit—a reform that puts work at the heart of our welfare system; a reform that increases opportunity; and a reform that will positively transform the lives of millions of our fellow citizens.

3.22 pm

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I will endeavour to abide by your request to be brief, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I thank the Labour party for choosing today’s debate topic. I congratulate the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) on her speech, and I am grateful to her for our discussions ahead of today’s debate. Of late, our parties have been united in our critical but constructive opposition to the UK Government’s roll-out of universal credit not just here but up the road.

To give credit where it is due, this is an excellent motion for a debate, and it has forced the welcome partial publication just announced by the Secretary of State. The only criticism I would make is that it should not just be the Work and Pensions Committee that sees the reports. I would have preferred to see at the end of the motion the words “for public consumption”. Why keep these reports private and just to the Select Committee? The UK Government reckon that this announcement in some way gets them out of hot water, but it changes nothing. The reports that are being requested by this House for public consumption are the DWP’s assessment of how the roll-out of universal credit is progressing. They are like the Department’s scorecard for universal credit.

Campaigner John Slater has been challenging the UK Government to release these reports for almost two years. In August this year, the Information Commissioner’s Office ruled that the UK Government had to release the reports. In its ruling, it said it agreed that “the DWP is correct that section 36 of the Act is engaged, but finds that the balance of the public interest supports disclosure of the requested information.”

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Is my hon. Friend also aware that the Department for Work and Pensions appealed to the first-tier tribunal about a 2011 project assessment report? Should we not know what the cost of that was to the taxpayer?

Neil Gray: Absolutely, and I will be coming to the cost to the taxpayer later in my speech. It is also worth noting that the ICO gave the DWP a rap over the knuckles for not replying to Mr Slater “within such time as is reasonable”.

However, for me, paragraph 38 of the ICO ruling is the most important and sums up why the UK Government must publish the reports in full. It says: “The Commissioner’s decision is that the balance of the public interest favours disclosure of all of the PAR reports. The age of these reports is significant, and recent events have increased the public interest in disclosure of the reports. The reports provide a much greater insight than any other available information about the UCP...there are strong arguments for transparency and accountability for a programme...”
which may affect 11 million UK citizens and process billions of pounds, which has had numerous reported failings in its governance. These arguments outweigh the need to protect advice provided in the now historic PAR reports.”

Essentially, the UK Government said these reports should be kept confidential to protect those who wrote them, but the ICO disagreed and said not only that the UK Government should publish, but that the names of the senior civil servants involved should not be redacted.

The ICO gave the DWP 35 calendar days from its judgment, which was on 30 August, or the Department would face being taken to court. The Secretary of State has essentially confirmed to me just now that it is his intention to take this matter to the High Court. Therefore, the position we are now in is that the UK Government are happy to see taxpayers’ money being spent to have this issue heard at the High Court. A Tory Government who say there is no money to properly fix universal credit finds the money to go to court to stop the publication of reports on universal credit. It really makes me wonder what they are so desperate to hide.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that there is a worrying pattern? During a campaign led by myself and other hon. Members from Glasgow to save city jobcentres, the same Department refused to publish equality impact assessments on those closures.

Neil Gray: Absolutely. The Department does not have a very good record in this regard.

If the reports were as glowing about universal credit as Ministers have been—indeed, just now—surely Ministers would have released them publicly. Perhaps we will find that, actually, the UK Government know just how bad UC is in its current stripped-back and cut-to-ribbons form. Perhaps the reports will confirm what all the expert charities and MPs from all corners of this House have been saying. Perhaps they will confirm the need for the UK Government to finally invest in universal credit and properly fix it.

The SNP is not opposed to the idea of universal credit—we have said that for a number of years. We gave universal credit a cautious welcome when it was first mooted: a welcome because the idea of simplifying the social security system was good, and cautious because it is a Tory Government in charge of social reform.

The “cautious” element has proven to be canny. The universal credit we see before us now is unrecognisable from that first presented in the early days of the coalition Government. Work allowances have been decimated, from that first presented in the early days of the coalition to the now historic PAR reports.

Universal credit is about making recipients pay—pay for the economic failure of this Government and pay for the failure of austerity. Making work pay is important. The stagnation of wages was cited by former Social Mobility Commission chair Alan Milburn as he resigned from it. He also said that the UK Government have been so preoccupied with Brexit that they do “not seem to have the necessary bandwidth to ensure the rhetoric of healing social division is matched with the reality”.

Recipients of universal credit are being let down by this Government as they seek expert advice and support. Citizens Advice Scotland is concerned about the removal of implicit consent for it to act on clients behalf on UC.

Heidi Allen: I have been working very closely with Citizens Advice throughout this whole campaign. Is it not true that Citizens Advice in Scotland and in England have both welcomed the announcement that was made in the Budget and said that it is an excellent improvement?

Neil Gray: I just welcomed it, but I said that it does not go far enough and needs to go further. Citizens Advice Scotland is concerned about the removal of implicit consent for it to act on clients’ behalf on UC. Clients are now required to provide explicit consent and therefore to be present when their cases are being discussed. We, as MPs, have implicit consent—why has it not been extended to advocates like our local CABs? When I recently visited Airdrie CAB and spoke at its annual general meeting, it was concerned about its ability to represent its clients on universal credit in practical and in volume terms. We, as well as Conservative Members, get that feedback when we go to our local CABs and jobcentres.

It is not just the former Social Mobility Commission chair who has intervened in the past few days on universal credit. In Scotland, our Children’s Commissioner, Bruce Adamson, has suggested that legal action against the UK Government may be required to protect the human rights of children and to stop them being impoverished. Mr Adamson was damning in his criticism of universal credit, saying that there are “a number of issues around the way in which Universal Credit is calculated and how it is paid. But this leads to a much, much deeper issue... We are talking about things like having a warm
and secure place to live, having regular hot, nutritious meals and also the ability to access things like transport to get to school and to enjoy social and cultural activities that we know are so important to their development.”

He wants to avoid legal action, and said:

“We really need political leadership here and we need to make sure that we are never in a situation where children are going without the basics that they need.”

I absolutely agree.

Given Scotland’s Children’s Commissioner’s comments about the impact of universal credit on child poverty, we have to wonder what are in those DWP project assessment reviews, especially when the Joseph Rowntree Foundation reported this week that 400,000 more children and 300,000 more pensioners are living in poverty now than five years ago. The JRF says that while there are still significant challenges for Scotland to face regarding poverty levels and the impact of poverty, levels of poverty are lower in Scotland than in the rest of the UK. It also found that falls in poverty among pensioners and families with children have been greater and more sustained in Scotland than elsewhere. That shows that our approach is working. But imagine what we could do on poverty in Scotland if, instead of spending hundreds of millions a year on mitigating the effects of the bedroom tax and other Tory cuts, we spent that money on proactive anti-poverty measures or on the council tax reduction scheme, which has been shown today to benefit one in 10 Scots.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con) rose—

Neil Gray: I am really pressed for time now; I do apologise. [Interruption.] I have taken interventions. Madam Deputy Speaker has indicated that I was to keep within 10 minutes.

When the likes of the Child Poverty Action Group, the Poverty Alliance and others predict that further roll-out of universal credit in its current form, coupled with the benefits freeze, will force even more children into poverty in the coming years, the UK Government need to wake up to the evidence that their policy choices make them an agent in rising poverty, as opposed to the Scottish Government, who are working hard to protect low-income families.

In conclusion, the reports may well be as glowing about universal credit as Ministers have been, but the Government’s desperate obstinacy and obsfuscation over a period of two years would suggest otherwise. Given the intense pressure that has been put on Ministers in recent months by the Scottish Government, MPs from across the House and expert charities, I imagine that had the reports been positive, they would have found their way into the public domain to support the Government’s position. It is normally the cold light of day shining on harsh truths that forces people from their entrenched positions, so the Government should make these reports public. Let us see the DWP’s assessment of universal credit, and let us all come together to find a way to fix universal credit and help those who need help the most.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I advise Members that we will start off with an eight-minute limit and hope that we can make sure that everybody gets the same amount of time.

3.35 pm

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to contribute to this important debate. Universal credit is a vital reform for our country and for those who rely on the system to live. Universal credit enables people to get off that system and find the jobs they need to provide for their families and children in the long term.

I have been listening with interest to the debate since it began, and I welcome the Minister’s decision to release the reports to the Work and Pensions Committee. As my right hon. Friend said, there is a balance to be struck between transparency—releasing everything into the public domain, or into the semi-public domain of the Select Committee—and ensuring that people in the forum of implementation can talk with candour, honesty and openness about the challenges that are coming.

By default, a project assessment review—I say this as someone who worked on this kind of thing as a project manager in industry for 15 years—is an assessment of the challenges in a project. It does not necessarily focus on the overall principle, which is very sound in this case. It does not focus on the successes, the targets that have been hit or the achievements that have been made. It focuses, rightly, on the challenges. However, my concern is that the tenor of this debate, and previous such debates that I have attended, suggests that some Members and some others outside the Chamber will not take the reports in that context or spirit. I fear that the focus will be on the challenges as the most terrible and outrageous things ever, and that there will be no recognition of the fact that there is a balance to be struck. I hope that hon. Members will reflect appropriately on that.

I do not understand why a request is being made for project assessment reviews that were carried out in 2012 when, by the common consent of everybody in this House, this innovation has changed dramatically and totally since then. Any project assessment review from 2012 will be completely archaic and irrelevant to any decision on what happens in 2017. That suggests to me that the intention of Opposition Members who are pushing this activity is to embarrass, rather than to be constructive in their criticism.

I noted that the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) stated on at least two separate occasions that universal credit had been acknowledged to be not fit for purpose. I am not aware of anybody on my side of the debate who has acknowledged that. Therefore, I can only assume that the Labour party’s intention is to push an incorrect narrative, which reflects the analysis in articles that have been written in The Guardian and elsewhere, and which does not accurately reflect the changes that have been made.

Let me be clear: I do not stand here today and suggest that universal credit is absolutely perfect. No Government Member is suggesting that. We recognise that in our complicated and difficult benefit system, which has been created over decades, there will be complexities, challenges and problems. I sat here on 18 October and listened to hon. Friends and Opposition Members speak in the first debate on universal credit during my time here. The principle behind universal credit is that we are fixing forward—we are assessing the problems, looking for ways to solve them and putting the solutions in place. That is exactly what the Chancellor did when he made his announcement two weeks ago.
I welcome the decision to release the documents to the Work and Pensions Committee. I hope that people who have an interest in the debate will take the documents in the spirit in which they were intended, although I fear that not everybody will do so. I welcome the Chancellor’s decision to make changes, and I hope that additional changes will be made, if necessary, to move our welfare system on. The system has not worked for decades, and it has kept millions of people on welfare and ensured that they do not go out to work.

I am dealing right now with constituents on legacy benefits who have given up work, or who are about to, because housing benefit does not pay and cannot cope with the kind of variability in their earnings. If universal credit can solve those kinds of problems, which is what I understand it will do and what my jobcentre tells me will be achieved when it is implemented, I welcome it coming to North East Derbyshire and the surrounding area.

3.40 pm

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): I want to make three points. First, universal credit is not being introduced in isolation; it follows so-called welfare reforms that were made under the Labour Government, the coalition Government and this Government. The cumulative impact for many of my constituents has been destitution. We have made decisions in this House to pay for pensioner households rather than ordinary families.

I have been running constituency surgeries for 38 years. At the most recent surgery, just last Friday, for the first time ever a gentleman rose after we had spoken and I had to try to persuade him not to commit suicide. Such was his desperation at the future he saw for himself. I realised that the hand that shook my hand was wet, because he had been crying. The hand that shook my hand was the hand that had wiped away those tears.

On Friday, Feeding Birkenhead—a brilliant organisation, but one that ought to be unnecessary—reported a family coming in, a husband and wife and their young child. The child was crying with hunger. The family was fed. The father said that it had been a lucky week for him, because neighbours had taken pity and invited them to a funeral, so that they could finish off the food after the other guests had been fed. When their little boy was shown the shelf where the toys and lunch packs were kept, he chose the lunch pack. That is the background of growing destitution that I see in my constituency, and against which we have to judge universal credit and the debate we are having today.

Many DWP staff do not share the Secretary of State’s confidence in this benefit. Feeding Birkenhead is putting considerable food through schools, which get it home where it is needed. On Saturday we will be filling thousands upon thousands of Christmas hampers, and among the volunteers will be 146 DWP staff. They know where this benefit is going and they are unhappy.

[Interruption.] The Secretary of State is mumbling. Their inability to show their normal compassion by having discretion is an issue of such importance that we will return to it soon.

Against that background, we come to the request for papers. The Secretary of State and I have noticed that this motion is different from the motion on the Committee on Exiting the European Union. That Committee was to receive the papers and lay them before the House. This motion does not ask for that. I love being a member of the Work and Pensions Committee, but I can assure the House that we are not a group of Trappist monks and monkesses; people will naturally want to talk. Therefore, before any documents come to us, I will be asking for the Speaker’s interpretation of this motion, and what sense of secrecy or honour will bind the Committee when we receive the documents. Even if we only read them, that will surely affect how we pose questions. If they are all so good, surely we would have received them long ago.

Neil Gray: The right hon. Gentleman is making an incredibly powerful and emotive speech, and I commend him for it. Does he agree that the partial publication, and giving the redacted copies to the Select Committee, leaves its members in an invidious position? As the Committee Chair, does he think that it would be far better for the Government to publish the reports in full and publicly, as the Information Commissioner recommended?

Frank Field: That is why I will seek the Speaker’s advice. It may partly be why Members on the Treasury Bench have accepted the motion: because it now shifts all the pressure from them to the Select Committee. As I said, we are thankfully not made up of Trappist monks and monkesses. We are all very active members of the Committee.

I will make my last and perhaps most important point. The Government and Government Back Benchers—a rather rude one to my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) earlier—keep making assertions about the wonder of the benefit, for which there are no figures in the public domain. We do not know how the benefit affects work records, apart from those of the simplest claimants. We do not know from the Government the effect on rent arrears or on the use of food banks. We do not fully know the numbers of people who are waiting in our constituencies for more than six weeks—soon, thank God, five weeks, on which I congratulate the Secretary of State.

In the great spirit of openness, with which the Secretary of State has landed the Select Committee, I hope that we will shortly put before Parliament the data on the working of the new benefit, which will tell us whether the grand assertions that the Secretary of State and Ministers continue to make are true. I hope that they are true, but none of us has the data to back them up.

Before we do not vote on the motion tonight, I want to recall that the benefit is being rolled out for families of working age who have suffered multiple and cumulative benefit cuts. I described some of the effects. How does an MP give someone hope, when I do not have hope for them, that things will radically improve, and persuade them not to top themselves? What do we do to a family, who last year gave toys for our Christmas hampers, but have been so reduced in circumstances that this year, their little boy cries with hunger? That is the message that I want to go out from the debate.

We will receive the documents and advice on what we are to do with them, but I hope that the Secretary of State does not believe that releasing them is some of historical value—will prevent the Committee’s insistence on a proper publication of data, which allows us to hold the Government to account for the hunger in our constituencies.
3.48 pm

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I do not know where to start after that. I am humbled by the words of my good friend the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field). No Governments are perfect, no benefit system is perfect and no debate or motion is perfect, but by God we will work together and make this better.

Select Committees are cross-party and they play an important role in scrutiny. Our Work and Pensions Committee is no different. I am sure that our focus on universal credit—I am sorry; I am not very good at this job, am I Mr Deputy Speaker?

Frank Field: I am amazed because, for the first time, I have been able to report publicly the events I described without weeping. I am so affected by them—I am as affected as my hon. Friend. That is the debate that we really having: how do we represent here the desperation of many of our constituents when many of us feel that we cannot offer them hope? I fear that that may not have helped my hon. Friend. Friend, but it was meant to.

Heidi Allen: We have a job to do. I am sure the Select Committee’s evidence-gathering helped the Government to identify improvements and make universal credit better. We will continue that work.

No one should underestimate the poverty-fighting potential of universal credit. I believe that and mean that most sincerely. There is a reason why work coaches are so motivated by it. There is a reason why, when claimants are fully up and running on it, they move into work faster and stay in work for longer. That does happen. The old system of multiple individual benefits was no better than a game of roulette. What kind of reward was it when a determined claimant successfully gained more hours of work only to lose their benefits? On their way up, they were stopped in their tracks by a benefit trap set at an arbitrary and life-limiting 16 hours. No one should be proud of that and no one should want to sustain that.

Universal credit is totally different. It offers a wraparound support service to claimants. I am the first to admit that the roll-out has had more issues than it should have had. There are aspects of the system I wish had been fixed before we pushed the button to roll it out further. I understand, however, why the Government were reluctant to pause it. They were eager to offer that transformative support and its potential for a better future to more claimants. That is what the Government wish to do. I was pleased, therefore, when the Chancellor announced in the Budget a package of reforms worth £1.5 billion. Reducing the six-week wait, specifically asked for by the Work and Pensions Committee, was critical. I understand that banking system limitations meant that reducing the wait even further beyond five weeks was technically impossible, but the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State and the Minister for Employment listened to our concerns regarding the risk of rent arrears and debt, which were real, and then made further—I believe arguably greater—concessions than taking an additional one-week delay away. They increased availability and doubled to 100% the size of advance payments, so that emergency funds would be available to claimants on day one. The payback period was also doubled to 12 months.

This means that no claimant will be without money if they need it. No ifs, no buts—fact. If someone needs an advance today, they get it.

The most welcome addition, for me at least, was the automatic additional payment of two more weeks of housing benefit for all claimants currently in receipt. That is huge! That is an additional two weeks of housing money on top of universal credit monthly payment. This is the good that the Government can do. These are the actions of the Government I envisaged when I first heard Theresa May on the steps of No. 10.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne) (Lab): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way and for her compassion for the misery that I know many of my constituents have faced as universal credit has been rolled out in Newcastle. I have spoken about that many times, but does she share my concern that the announcements in the Budget will do nothing for those families who have already been pushed into misery, debt, the use of food banks and, potentially, the loss of their house? Does she want the Government to use that ability to support those families, too?

Heidi Allen: No family should be going through that. People have more difficult lives than I am blessed to have ever experienced, but work coaches are there, and discretionary housing payments and advance payments are there. Work coaches should be offering a wraparound service. I do not have universal credit yet in my area, but I hope that work coaches are doing everything they should for the hon. Lady’s constituents. There is no reason for a family to be put into that level of debt. If that is the case, the work coach is not doing what they should.

Universal Credit is the biggest transformation of our benefit system in decades. The Government’s slow roll-out and test and learn approach is the right one. They have been able to make amendments because of this approach, meaning the improvements announced in the Budget will be in place before a significant uplift in claimants moving on to the benefit. As we have heard today, that is so important because these are real people’s lives.

Jobcentres have received absolute clarity on making advance payments available to all claimants. I know this to be true, because I heard it first-hand recently at a regional work coach event in the east of England. I am greatly relieved by these operational improvements and relieved to know the Government will keep the taper rate under review. I understand the challenges to our public finances, but I remain of the opinion that universal credit will never be the ultimate poverty-fighting machine it can be and was designed to be until either the taper rate or work allowances are restored to their pre-2015 levels. As inflation shows signs of volatility, I support the Government completely as they keep a watchful eye on the taper rate.

If universal credit does not deliver the transformative results it should, we will look at it again. Universal credit is both revolution and evolution. The Work and Pensions Select Committee, on which I am proud to sit, will continue to monitor progress every step of the way. I thank the Government for offering to share these reports. They are project management assessment documents, not policy assessment documents, so their value might be limited—I do not know, we will see—but...
as a member of the Committee, I welcome the opportunity to review them. They will form part of the Committee’s ongoing and dedicated review of the project’s progress.

3.55 pm

Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): On Wednesday 18 October 2017, 80 Members from across the House debated a motion calling for a pause in the roll-out of universal credit. The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) said that she was touched by the speech made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), but we had an opportunity to pause and fix the system then. We had a chance to say, “Hang on a minute. This isn’t really working as we thought it would. Let’s pause it and fix it.” The hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) said we were “fixing forward”. I have no idea what that means. If something is broken, we fix it and then continue.

Lee Rowley: I can explain exactly what it means: when we discover a problem, we fix it as we go; we do not throw out the entire system. We are thinking about benefiting people in the long term. Nobody is saying the system is perfect, but the point of fixing forward is to improve as we go, which has been the principle since the beginning of the policy.

Fiona Onasanya: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but I beg to differ. If I had a vehicle that failed its MOT, I would fix it before putting it back on the road. I would not say, “I’ll keep on driving and see what happens.”

The motion in October was passed unanimously—by a vote of 299 to 0. None the less, despite that unanimous motion to pause the roll-out so that it might be fixed, the Government have continued with business as usual, saying, “Nothing’s going wrong. Let’s carry on as we were.”

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): Surely the hon.

Justin Tomlinson: I recognise those points, but one of the principles is that those who go to work are often paid in arrears. Surely it is better to help people to adjust to that while having the support of the named work coach and access to advance payments. Surely it is better to make this an easier process, rather than blocking people from having the opportunity to work at a later point.

Fiona Onasanya: What I do recognise is that most of those people’s rents are paid weekly, and I was able to choose the payment date that would suit me on the basis of the receipt of my salary. Fortunately, I could also take advantage of a payment holiday if I got into trouble. That does not work for these people, unless we say to organisations such as utility providers, “Do not make them use their emergency payments and take all that money immediately, because they will have nothing,” or say to housing associations and councils, “Please can we make sure that they are not offered a chance to be evicted?” I say “offered a chance” because I am being polite, but people get a notice to quit.

Should we not be saying, “We understand that there are issues”? I am not suggesting that it is negative to create a benefit that helps people to get into work, because I agree with the hand-up rather than the handout, but this is not a hand-up. Much like my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead, I sit with constituents who are struggling because they have been put into this system and there is no way for them to obtain the finance that they need.

I sit with constituents who have mental health issues and whose work coaches can only say to them, “We suggest that you go to this place for help,” because they have no power to say, “Let us stop this now, because we can see that you are not coping.” That is why we end up with constituents who are in the same position as those of my right hon. Friend. Work coaches have discretion, but they do not have the power to intervene and make decisions. They are not permitted to do that.

Sir John Major described universal credit as “operationally messy, socially unfair and unforgiving”, and those are the points on which I am focusing. I am not trying to knock the scheme. I am merely saying, “Please at least give us access to the documents so that we can speak to our constituents on the basis of knowledge, explain to them why they are in the position in which they have found themselves, and seek to assist them and
make things easier for them.” My constituents who have been put on universal credit will not receive their first payments until the day after Boxing day. How can that be transformational in a positive way? I ask the Secretary of State to listen properly to what we are saying, and not to claim that the system is working without giving us any evidence to show that it is not hurting the people whom we seek to represent.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I am reducing the speaking limit to seven minutes. I hope that I shall not need to drop it any further.

4.3 pm

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): Earlier this year, having tabled an emergency motion, the shadow Leader of the House argued passionately for more Opposition day debates. She highlighted at least four topics that she felt needed urgent debate, including social security and the personal independence payment, NHS nursing numbers, the Swansea tidal lagoon, and higher education regulations. Since she made that speech four months ago, only two of those topics have been raised by Labour Members in Opposition day motions. Instead, they have used their motions as a procedural tool to seek access to documents from the Government, but I want to raise the question of whether that is the appropriate route for such requests. The Secretary of State has acceded to the request in today’s motion—I welcome that disclosure—but he made it clear that this was an exceptional case. A five-hour Opposition day debate is not, in fact, the appropriate route to make such a request, and let me explain why that is the case.

Neil Gray: Will the hon. and learned Lady give way?

Lucy Frazer: I will make some progress for the moment.

By means of today’s motion, the Opposition seek the disclosure of various documents to a Select Committee. There is a procedure whereby Select Committees can ask for such documents themselves under Standing Orders. When I asked the Library last night whether there was any record of the Work and Pensions Committee having asked for these documents, I was told that there was no such record. If there had been such a request, there might have been the opportunity for a discussion between the Chairman of the Committee and the Secretary of State about the basis of the request and the use to which the documents might be put—the very issues that have been raised in this debate.

Raising such matters can be achieved in various ways, including through written and oral parliamentary questions, urgent questions and debates. Again, I asked the Library whether the Opposition had availed themselves of any of those procedures with regard to this request. The only record that the Library had of any such request related to one parliamentary question tabled three years—two Parliaments—ago. In this Parliament, we have had six debates on universal credit, as well as two ministerial statements and one urgent question. On none of those occasions has the relevance of these documents been raised, and not have they been asked for. If it were in the public interest urgently to disclose the documents, I would have expected Labour Members to have used one of those routes to request them through official channels over the course of this Parliament, but they have not done so. This is the first time the matter has been raised in this Parliament.

My question is whether it is appropriate to use an important procedure of this House to require the Government to produce documents when no prior official request has been made to obtain them through the usual procedures that are available to hold the Government to account. Is it appropriate to request important documents from the Government for the first time in a Opposition day motion when the contents of that motion were not known by the Government until yesterday?

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Of course it is right for the Opposition to raise the problems of universal credit at every opportunity. Surely the hon. and learned Lady can understand that. I know that the additional 30% of people using food banks in my constituency understand it.

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point, as universal credit is an important measure. I endorse that point, which many Members have made today. Universal credit affects those who need help the most, and that is the issue that we should be debating, rather than the disclosure of documents that could have been asked for before, to which the Secretary of State has now willingly granted access. We do not need a five-hour debate. It is the issues that affect our constituents that need to be debated, not a procedural request for documentation. In the course of the Standing Order No. 24 debate on the need for more Opposition day debates, the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) stated that such debates were important as “the key means in this House of raising issues of concern to our voters.”—[Official Report, 17 July 2017; Vol. 627, c. 616.]

I am sure that my voters care about universal credit, and I am sure that they care about getting people into work, but I am not sure they would welcome a day-long debate about a request for documents that could have been made, and granted, through the ordinary procedures of this House.

4.8 pm

Gerald Jones (Mertthyr Tydfil and Rhyhmney) (Lab): Thank you for calling me to speak in this important debate, Mr Deputy Speaker. I welcome the concessions that the Government have been forced to make on universal credit, but I do not believe that they go anything like far enough to relieve the hardship and stress that this roll-out is causing, and will continue to cause unless and until the Government take on board the concerns and take further action. There are so many issues with universal credit that it is essential that the full extent of all project assessment reviews that the Government carry out are placed with the Work and Pensions Committee. The Government must come clean about their assessments so that the risks can be identified and scrutiny can be provided by the Committee.

I know that many Members across the House share my concerns about the roll-out of universal credit. It might be convenient for the Government to ignore the views of those on the Opposition Benches who have expressed legitimate concerns on behalf of their constituents and, in the case of the Secretary of State, to pass them off as scaremongering. However, the Government should
not ignore the concerns shared by many outside this House, too—by organisations at the forefront of supporting people through difficult periods and supporting those who are most vulnerable. These organisations include Community Housing Cymru, which acts as an umbrella body for housing associations across Wales, and Citizens Advice, Shelter, and the Child Poverty Action Group. Does the Secretary of State consider these organisations to be scaremongering, too? These organisations know the pressures and hardship that UC is causing, as they are picking up the pieces when people’s lives are turned upside down due to the debt and anxiety caused by issues created by the roll-out, and the Government should take note.

Recent research undertaken by Cardiff Metropolitan University has highlighted the fact that one in five claimants is not receiving their full entitlement on time, with some facing a delay of four to eight weeks. The Government should address the waiting time as it is what causes most hardship. Many people do not have savings or money set aside to cover day-to-day living expenses during this period. The Government have taken away the seven-day waiting time, thus reducing the period to five weeks, but this is still too long for people to wait. We should also note that this is a minimum waiting time, and many people are waiting longer, leading to arrears and claimants needing to use food banks, increasing their debts and living in poverty.

We know that food bank use is increasing. A recent Trussell Trust report shows a 30% increase in people using food banks in areas where UC has been rolled out. Perhaps the Secretary of State thinks that report is scaremongering, too.

Michael Tomlinson: The hon. Gentleman mentions the Trussell Trust. Does he acknowledge that the trust’s chief executive has welcomed the measures the Chancellor announced in the Budget, and will he also welcome them?

Gerald Jones: If the hon. Gentleman had been listening, he would have heard that I welcomed those concessions earlier this afternoon, but, as I also said, they do not go far enough. I was with the Trussell Trust last weekend, collecting for the food bank in my area, because I know, as many other Members do, that that need is growing rather than reducing.

It appears that there are the same issues everywhere UC has been rolled out, and in my view it stands to reason that, with a hardened roll-out, these issues will only increase. We need a pause and fix. In Wales, as of October 2017 almost 25,000 people were in receipt of UC, meaning that the roll-out is just 6% complete; full roll-out is expected by November next year. I do not understand why the Government cannot see that this “apparent” overpayment happens, and that could either reduce or cost them UC. Surely a mechanism can be found within Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs. This is yet another glitch among a growing list that have beset UC.

We have heard today, and will continue to hear, the evidence that this roll-out is causing significant hardship and undue stress. The Government must listen to these very genuine concerns, and act to avoid further hardship. I was glad to hear the Secretary of State’s comments, and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) on introducing this motion.

4.14 pm  

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): We are discussing universal credit, and “universal” is an important word, because I think we universally agree in this Chamber that the previous system was a failure. People were stuck on the old system for far too long, and there was no incentive for them to get back into work. My hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) said that the old system was like a game of roulette, and we can all agree on the benefits of the current universal system. My hon. Friend also said that universal credit has poverty-fighting potential, and we can all agree on that because both Opposition Members and Government Members agreed with the general principles of universal credit. It is important to remember that there is cross-party support for what we are trying to achieve with universal credit. There may be divergence of opinion in certain areas, but the system is necessary and is supported across the Chamber. People on universal credit are more likely to find and stay in work, and they are more likely to earn more money while in work, which is an important message that we cannot forget in these repeated debates in the Chamber.

Neil Gray: Our cautious welcome for universal credit at the time was not unconditional. For us to make an assessment of how universal credit is going, we need to see the DWP’s assessments. The Government are going to make those documents available to the Work and Pensions Committee, so why can they not publish them more widely?

Douglas Ross: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for bringing me on to what is going to be published. The Government have agreed to exactly what is requested in this Opposition day motion, and I was pleased to hear the Secretary of State confirm at the Dispatch Box that he will ensure that everything that has been asked for will be delivered.
I listened most intently to the emotive speech of the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), but he went on to say that he was not particularly happy with the Government agreeing to everything in the motion and, indeed, that he will be raising the contents of the motion with Mr Speaker. I politely suggest that it may have been more useful for him to raise that concern with the Opposition Front-Bench team, because this is a Labour motion that the Government have accepted. The papers will be published, and any differences of opinion that the right hon. Gentleman now wants to raise with Mr Speaker should have been raised more promptly with his own Front-Bench team, because what they have asked for will be delivered.

Frank Field: Whatever has happened has happened. I welcome this motion, and I will seek Mr Speaker's advice, because I shall keep the story going in doing so.

Douglas Ross: But stories start somewhere, and the right hon. Gentleman could have started his story with the Opposition Front-Bench team, because he seems to be most critical of them for not asking more of the Government.

I accept the useful point made by my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), who suggested that Labour now wants more given that the Government have accepted what was requested in the motion. However, the information is extremely dated, so we have to question its merit and benefit given that the system has developed considerably. We have had four debates in the Chamber, and the policy has been developed since the Chancellor gave his Budget and will continue to be developed as we go forward.

Speaking of the Chancellor and his Budget, I welcome the £1.5 billion to address concerns around universal credit. [ Interruption. ] I hear the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) say, “That is not enough.” I listened carefully to his speech, in which he could not accept that the Government have done anything good, saying that this Government must be bad when they talk about universal credit and that he was not happy with the proposals in the Budget. I would therefore like to know what he thinks about Citizens Advice Scotland, which welcomed the changes to universal credit in the Budget, saying:

“Taken together, these measures will make a real difference to those claimants who are currently experiencing hardship.”

That is the sort of response that we should be getting from the Opposition parties.

Neil Gray: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Douglas Ross: I have already given way, and we are on a time limit.


Douglas Ross: I have already given way to the hon. Gentleman.

The changes in the Budget will have a real impact. I have already mentioned the £1.5 billion that will address some concerns, but the removal of the seven-day waiting period for new claimants will mean that no one waits six weeks to receive their first universal credit payment.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Douglas Ross: I am sorry, but we are on a time limit.

Claimants who need support can get advance payments of up to 100% of their estimated monthly entitlement, effectively removing the wait for first payments altogether and going further than anyone on either side of the House and many external commentators were asking for. The Budget changes show that this is a Government who are listening. This is a Government who accept concerns raised by Members on both sides of the House and who want to make changes to improve a system that is designed to improve many people’s lives.

Because of those Budget changes, we have also seen a reduction in the pace of the roll-out in Scotland. In my area, Moray Council will now not see the roll-out until June 2018, which will allow council staff and DWP staff to work to enact the positive changes that we saw in the Budget.

I am delighted that the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) has returned to the Chamber, as in both his interventions he addressed the impact of poor broadband on universal credit. The Secretary of State is correct that the problem of broadband is not for the Department for Work and Pensions. It is actually a problem for the Scottish Government, who are failing in the broadband roll-out. [ Interruption. ] SNP Members do not like it. They are shouting across the Chamber because they are failing to deliver broadband in Scotland, which is why this Conservative Government are correct to bypass the Scottish Government in the next roll-out to ensure that we can have effective broadband across Scotland, addressing the concerns so ably raised by the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross.

This Conservative Government are introducing transformational change. This is a system that had to be corrected because of the failures of the Labour party and of a system that did not help people into work—indeed, the system kept people out of work. With such major transformational changes, there will have to be improvements along the way. I am pleased that this Conservative Government have listened and have reacted to concerns but are continuing with a system of universal credit that wants to help people back into work, rather than ensuring that people cannot get into work and stay out of work. By doing that, we not only improve the lives of individuals who get back into work but we improve life for our communities, which we should all support.

4.22 pm

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): Universal credit has been rolled out in my constituency for some time, and my office has seen its effect. Universal credit is pushing people into poverty and making life harder. Across the House, we must agree to do everything that can be done and to release any information that can help us better understand the situation and fix it.

I have local examples of how universal credit is affecting my constituents. I have a constituent who sustained life-changing injuries while serving in Iraq. He was medically retired by the military but has had to go for further universal credit assessments, which have caused him further stress. Why is my constituent having
to go through that, and why are the Ministry of Defence and the Department for Work and Pensions not joined up?

I have previously spoken in this place about a single mother in my constituency who is on universal credit but, because of the way the system works, is not able to pay for childcare, so is having to consider giving up work. Again, why is a system that is supposed to help people into work making single parents have to choose between looking after their children and work?

I have heard a lot today from Conservative Members about how no one on universal credit has to wait the full six weeks, which is not true. Just two weeks ago, a constituent came to my surgery and told me he applied for the advance payment but was denied. It is called an advance payment, but it is a loan. I have contacted the Department for Work and Pensions and my local jobcentre to find out why he was refused the advance payment—I have been told time and again that no one is refused—but I have not had an answer. So, again, I would like an answer. If somewhere in these documents I can find an answer to that—some working to show why the Department has come to its decision—that has to be released and it is in the public interest for that to be done.

**Danielle Rowley:** I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend on that. There are many reasons why this information must be released.

Another issue I wish to raise is the fully digital aspect of the system. Many constituents have come to me because they are vulnerable, elderly or disabled and they are simply not able to use the digital aspect. They have not been able to get out of their house to get to a jobcentre—of course, these are being closed across Scotland—to get this support. Again, do these documents contain an answer on that? Will something in them tell us why this decision has been taken? Will something show the working of the Department on why it has reached its decisions?

The third thing I am concerned about is the reputation of this place. After our debate and vote on UC, constituents have come to me saying, “Fantastic. You’ve been helping me because I am struggling under this system, but now of course it is going to be paused and fixed because you had a vote on it. I followed that and am very grateful to everyone who voted on it.” I had to say to them, “Well, you’re right that we had a vote and we won it, but no action has been taken, and we did not see any tangible measures in the Budget that would address the issues we have raised. The Chancellor refused to pause and review universal credit.” People have therefore rightly asked me how this can be allowed: how we can have a vote and yet not see any action taken.

I have asked numerous written questions to the Department, but the reply to them all has been that the information cannot be obtained or that my constituency is in a larger area with different constituencies that do not yet have the roll-out, so there is no information to be given. No wonder there is large public mistrust of this system; it seems so opaque; we cannot get the answers we need; and now there are secret documents and they are not going to be released. If they are released, it will be to the Select Committee and not to the House and to the public. I want to know why these project assessment reviews will not be released, because I desperately feel that, having many constituents come to me with grave issues, I need to know what these problems are.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) for giving such as passionate speech earlier and disclosing some issues. I have two constituents who have taken their own lives, both of whom were on UC. They were both very desperate and both had been to my local citizen’s advice bureau for help, as they had no money. I will not cry for them in this place, because their memory deserves not tears but anger and action. I want these papers to be released, so that I can find some answers to these questions and give people in my constituency the certainty that they deserve.

**Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con):** I welcome the Minister’s statement on making available the reports requested by the Labour party. I am pleased to speak in this debate and to challenge the belief among some Opposition Members that helping people into work and away from relying on state welfare is just too difficult and too complicated. I accept that our work as MPs is not easy. We all do our best for our constituents, and I accept that most often they come to us in the last resort and expect our help. But the privilege of being elected as an MP is to take on and tackle sensitive subjects and to unravel bad policies which hold people back, regardless of how complicated they seem.

I do not need to reference emails and surgery cases to know that the only way to help people out of poverty is through work. I grew up in social housing, where families had not worked for two or three generations, with households in which children had never seen their parents go out to work, and where they were told—where I was told—time and again to “lower your expectations and stay in line for welfare.” Aspirations to work were met with cliff-edge drop-offs and the loss of benefits. Why would someone take a risk to secure a job that may or may not work out when that is weighed up against losing benefits and the drama it takes to get back on to welfare to make sure they have a home? For too many people, the risk is too great. That is why universal credit works. It tapers as a person secures more work and does what welfare is meant to do: it provides a hand up and a safety net.

**Mike Amesbury:** The Labour party is what it says on the tin: we are the party of work. Many of those in receipt of universal credit, and tax credits before that, are actually in work, with many of them on low pay.

**Ms Ghani: I do not accept the hon. Gentleman’s intervention. There are now more people with better opportunities—whether children going to better schools, more working-class kids going to university or people on lower incomes taking more of that income home to support their families. I grew up in a Labour stronghold where I was told repeatedly to know my place, which was to remain on welfare like everybody else in my community. That is why the Conservative party introduced...**
universal credit, and why it is so important that we ensure that it is successfully delivered. Universal credit is founded on the belief that work should always pay, and it encourages people to find work and not stay trapped in the vicious cycle of the benefits system.

The request for the publication of the reports in the motion has been granted. I am, though, a little perplexed about why we need to see reports on assessments from back in 2012 when we have facts and figures that we can rely on today. I hope that the Minister can shed some light on that. Here is what is already in the public domain. Critics should welcome the fact that each person on universal credit is treated as an individual and provided with tailored support, working around their personal needs. For the first time, people have a named work coach. This is the first time that their personal requirements and unique needs are being assessed. It is the first time that their childcare, housing or work support is being assessed. More importantly, this will be the first time that many people from my community have had real support that tackles their needs and supports their aspirations to improve their and their families’ lives. They are no longer just a number to be told to get to the back of the queue.

Let us not forget that the previous welfare system created cliff edges, discouraged people from working for more than 16 hours a week and, most damning of all, trapped 1.5 million on out-of-work benefits for nearly a decade. I challenge anyone who would disagree that those people had been failed by the system.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I have wanted to make a comment for some time, so I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way.

On the supposed blocks in the previous system, I have been contacted by constituents who were previously nursing students in receipt of a nursing bursary and, under the old system, tax credits. Because that bursary was not considered an income, they were still able to get tax credits, so they could continue to pay their rent, bills and so on. Now, under universal credit, someone is doing a teaching degree and is in receipt of student finance, which counts as an income, so they are not eligible for any other benefits and they are already three months behind on their rent. Is that a demonstration of somebody being able to move on?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): The hon. Lady has made a speech; we will have short interventions.

Ms Ghani: That is where the work coach should be able to help. The hon. Lady should be challenging the work coaches in that community. People are moving on: they are able to get a loan to get an education and change the life choices available to them.

With its one simple payment and gradual introduction, universal credit is flexible enough to respond to any technical issues. Previously, the existence of six different benefits was an overbearing and bureaucratic mess. The system was expensive to administer; it was confusing to understand; and, most of all, it was demoralising to boot. The results so far show that universal credit is working: people claiming universal credit are 13% more likely to be in work than people claiming jobseeker’s allowance, and they are earning more money and are more likely to take on a job.

Such drastic reform will always come with complications, and over the past four years, imperfections have been uncovered and brought to light. I am pleased that the Government have listened and acted to improve universal credit, by ensuring that it achieves its original goals. The £1.5 billion package to address the delivery concerns will be welcomed across the country in places where universal credit has yet to be rolled out. The removal of the seven-day waiting period will mean that applicants will be entitled to receive universal credit from the first day of application. Those who need it can also now access up to a month’s worth of universal credit within five days via an interest-free advance. I cannot be the only Member of Parliament who has struggled to deal with constituents who have been made to feel insecure and afraid to access the welfare to which they are entitled, because they are made to feel that, somehow, it will work against them. The free support phone line is also welcome. These important changes mean that we are not letting down those who need our support the most.

Universal credit is committed to helping people into work, and, once in work, to help them progress and increase their earnings, providing security and opportunities for them and their families. It is important that the Government are fully committed to the gradual roll-out, giving the ever reducing numbers of unemployed people a greater chance of the security that only a job can provide. We must not revert to the old failing system where 1.5 million people were trapped in out-of-work benefits for a decade.

If people are not convinced by my arguments, let me quote the chief executive of St Mungo’s:

“We have been calling for a new strategy to tackle homelessness. I welcome the opportunity to work with the taskforce to end the national scandal of rough sleeping altogether. We are also pleased to see a number of changes to Universal Credit that St Mungo’s had been calling for, particularly the removal of the seven day waiting period and the extension of the repayment period for advances to 12 months.”

I will end by quoting someone from Citizen’s Advice, because we all reach out to them when we are dealing with difficult constituency work. The chief executive said:

“The £1.5 billion package for Universal Credit announced in the Budget last week will directly help millions of the most vulnerable people.”

4.36 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this afternoon’s debate, and I want to support the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams). I also wish to thank the Secretary of State for his concessions today. Although I welcome them, they are, sadly, not nearly enough to address the very many serious flaws of this failed benefit.

I wish to address my remarks to the situation in my constituency of Reading East where universal credit is rolled out tomorrow, on 6 December. Tomorrow, 10,000 of my constituents will be hit hard by this failing programme and many—I wish to point this out to the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) and others—are families in work; some are disabled; and some are people in all kinds of desperate need. We have 10,000 people facing the possibility of a Dickensian Christmas in a
relatively wealthy town in one of the most prosperous regions of the country in 21st century Britain. Is that acceptable to any of us? I do not think so.

The delays in the roll-out— it could be several weeks— mean that it is unlikely that many of those 10,000 people will be able to enjoy the benefits in time for Christmas. Indeed, many will only be paid universal credit in January 2018. Just like the family of Tiny Tim in Dickens’s “Christmas Carol”, there will be no Christmas in these households. For those who are not familiar with that situation, it is important to consider that those families will be struggling to find any sort of Christmas dinner, any sort of presents and any sort of celebration.

I note that the Secretary of State has now allowed a greater level of loans for families in receipt of universal credit. However, until January, loans of only 50% are available, so I ask Conservative Members to consider what it would be like to be one of the working poor in Reading, struggling to get by with 50% less income from benefits to cover their Christmas expenditure. That is half the payments they would have had this time last year. Is not Christmas hard enough already for these families? This is not only a sadly mistaken policy, but actually wrong, and the roll-out, in its current form, is failing deeply.

I appreciate that some changes were made in the Budget. However, deep flaws remain—not least the long wait and various other points made by hon. Members. I will run through some of the effects of the budgetary changes on my constituents that many have overlooked today. For the areas where the roll-out is taking place in December, it is irrelevant that the seven-day waiting period is being changed. It will be too late because it happens in February. The period over which advance payments are recovered is being extended, but this is also too late, starting in January. The interest-free advances are too late, as they start in 2018. On and on—these late interventions will not help families who will have a terrible Christmas this year.

It is quite clear that universal credit is, quite simply, a failing programme. The Government are refusing to release key documents, and the changes set out in the Budget fail to meet the needs of families. Given these fundamental flaws, the failure in delivery and the Dickensian misery being forced on families, surely the Government will admit that it is time to pause and fix this benefit.

4.40 pm

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Our welfare system has historically been the victim of criticism from both sides of the House. Colleagues, their views often stoked by the media, take opposing rhetorical positions that rarely lead to improvements in the system and certainly do not help individual constituents. I thank the Secretary of State for making exceptions and publishing the extra information for the Work and Pensions Committee. I hope that it will help with the Committee’s work. In the future, I hope that we will have more up-to-date analysis that will help to guide that work in a more meaningful way.

In previous debates on universal credit—we have had a few—Members of all political stripes in this House have accepted that universal credit is a positive and transformational reform, and that it is a real attempt to change the culture and improve results for those hoping to get into work. Everyone will recognise that the roll-out has encountered challenges, but I hope that most Members would accept that with a nine-year roll-out, the Department for Work and Pensions has reacted to concerns raised. It should not be forgotten that most major Government welfare programmes encounter difficulties, as the last Labour Government did when they made £2 billion of erroneous payments of tax credits, forcing working families and single parents to pay back money that they had already spent. This is not party political; it is about the difficulties of being a responsible Government.

In my constituency, there is one jobcentre, which is in Alloa, where universal credit went live with full service in June 2017. The jobcentre in Perth, which is just outside my constituency but also serves my constituents, will have full service in 2018. I have been into those jobcentres. I have worked for a day in the Alloa jobcentre, sitting in with the new cohort who were transitioning on to universal credit, and even with individual claimants who were coming in for the first time to apply for universal credit. I saw how beneficial and transformational universal credit can be when properly applied.

I want to pick up on some of the comments made by the Opposition, particularly by Members on the Labour Benches, and to look at the reasons why people are having more difficulties and going to food banks. I asked my office to analyse all the people who have come to my office with universal credit concerns. Two of the key issues were waiting times and limited information such as not knowing how to access advances. I have fortunately been able—through this place, thanks to the Minister—to push for extra training in jobcentres in Scotland to ensure that advances are now proactively offered to claimants across Scotland. Thanks to the dedication of my constituency team, 80% of our universal credit cases have been satisfactorily resolved in a very short period of time. They were fixed because this is a new system, and I pay tribute to my team for all their work.

I must mention some of the rhetoric on the Opposition Benches, specifically from the hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda), who referred to people having a Dickensian Christmas. With the greatest respect to the hon. Gentleman, I have lived in developing countries such as China and Thailand, where I really saw harrowing inequality. People with no limbs had to beg on the street because there was no welfare system and they had no protections whatever. It is completely unfair of him to cast the same aspersions on this Government and our country.

One of the reasons I gave for why my constituents are struggling to access universal credit was limited information. Many of them have come to me because they are nervous about what they see in the media, and they believe they cannot access universal credit and advances.

I welcome criticism. To be fair, SNP Members have criticised universal credit and, as I will explain in a moment, many points have been addressed as a result of that criticism from them and from the Conservative side too. However, we have to be careful about the rhetoric we use, because it has real implications for people in our constituencies.

Frank Field: I disagree with my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) because the Christmas story written by Dickens had a happy ending.
Luke Graham: And I hope universal credit, with these changes, will too.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Luke Graham: I am sorry. I am going to make a little more progress.

Quite rightly, Conservative Members—I have been one of them—have made criticisms of universal credit. I have written to Ministers, as have many other colleagues, and issues have been raised on all Benches throughout the debate.

The criticisms that have been raised include concerns about the seven-day waiting time, advances and paying landlords. Well, the seven-day waiting time is being removed. On the concerns about paying landlords, we have the offer to pay them directly, and we have the landlord portal to make sure they have the right information. On the concerns about advances, we know that those can be settled within five days or even on the same day. On those issues, therefore, I would ask Members to make sure we are giving the right information to our constituents so that they can access the advance they are entitled to and no one faces any hardship over Christmas.

The Opposition also say that universal credit and some of the hardship I have seen first hand are down to some sort of ideological Tory austerity. Yet, the changes that have been pushed forward mean that there has been an extra £65 billion in spending on welfare, which is the cost of all these changes since 2010. So if we are trying to do these things just to save money, we have done a pretty poor job.

Changes have been made to universal credit; it has been improved. There has been a nine-year roll-out. I still have concerns about universal credit.

Liz Twist: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that, for people in my constituency, which started the universal credit roll-out on 1 November, these changes will have no impact, and people will face the same problems that all of us have acknowledged in our previous discussions? It would be great if the Government could make some progress to ensure that those people in my constituency have a better Christmas than they are expecting.

Luke Graham: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. Some of the changes that were previously announced by the Government—especially on advances, guidance and making sure people get payments within five days—will benefit her constituents. The measures put forward in the Budget will obviously come in the new year, but the advances the Government previously announced are in place, and people can benefit from them now. I hope she will help with offering them.

As I was saying, I still have concerns, especially about those who are already in debt who transfer on to universal credit. I would ask my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to look in more detail at what can be done with some of the budget financing schemes and about the knowledge and availability of them for constituents who are in debt. There are also those people who are on variable incomes and those who are self-employed. Also, in terms of single household payments, we need to make sure no one is disadvantaged by their sex, relationship or circumstances.

One issue I hope to work with SNP colleagues on is the split payment system in Scotland, where we have the devolved Administration. Evidence suggests that that system is not as beneficial as we originally thought. Hopefully, we can work together to improve that.

I hope the Government will remain focused in delivering this reform, will continue to improve the system and will show the flexibility to fix cases where mistakes have been made. We can work together constructively to boost employment by the 250,000 we expect and to make sure we help the 1.5 million who were previously trapped in poverty and benefits.

4.49 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I would have thought that if Ministers were so confident about the success of universal credit, they would release these reports in full and in public. The people deserve to hear if the experience in those reports matches that of those who have endured the failings of universal credit in our constituencies where it has had an impact. As my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) pointed out, there are many and manifest failures with the system that have been reported many times.

When the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) told us of the experiences in his surgeries, it brought tears to the eyes of Members, but this is not the first time that universal credit has brought tears. I remember, just after being elected as an MP, meeting members of the local citizens advice bureau, and there were tears as they talked about the trials and tribulations of people who were going through in their office. Elaine Donnelly, who works with Macmillan Citizens Advice Partnership, was one of those people in tears. She came to my universal credit summit—Ministers did not attend, although they were invited—and told us of the experiences that she had with people who are terminally ill. Crucially, she says that she no longer cries, because she has heard so much about this that she is now battle-weary. She is numb. It does not hit her in the same way any more because so much has been going on.

Members such as the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) talk about the rhetoric that goes on, using words such as “screaming”.

Not only have all Conservative Members been invited to my constituency to hear about these experiences, but so have Government Front Benchers.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): The hon. Gentleman recently visited my constituency on the subject of universal credit. I was very grateful that he visited the beautiful constituency of Stirling. Which aspects of universal credit—its principles—does he support? Every speech I have heard him make in the House has been an undiluted torrent of negativity about universal credit. It is accepted that the system is not perfect, but can he tell us which parts work and which he supports?

Drew Hendry: I am very glad to answer that question. To repeat the statements that I have made and that my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts has made today, SNP Members have never opposed the principle of universal credit. We have always supported...
the principle of simplifying the benefits system so that people can get social security in a simpler and more effective way, but—this is where Conservative Members really need to open their ears and listen—the experience of people applying for universal credit is not that the process is simple. It is, for many people, hard and devastating. For a lot of people, it can really have an impact on not only their family lives, but their health.

Luke Graham: The hon. Gentleman and I have been involved in politics and campaigning for a few years. Does he accept that there have been issues with a lot of welfare reforms? Benefit sanctions were a big issue at the 2015 general election, as the SNP has rightly mentioned. He said that he made demands for changes. Can he list the demands that have not already been answered by Ministers?

Stephen Kerr: Specifics!

Luke Graham: Can the hon. Gentleman give us specifics?

Drew Hendry: I would be absolutely delighted to answer that question, and I am genuinely grateful for that intervention. Since 2013, universal credit has driven up poverty and misery in my constituency, as is evidenced by a dramatic increase in food bank use. [Interruption.] The hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire says that that is not the case, but he is not letting me get to the full explanation.

Jamie Stone: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Drew Hendry: I will do so very briefly, because there is not much time and I want to make these points.

Jamie Stone: Once upon a time, the hon. Gentleman and I served on the Highland Council. Does he agree that one of the unwanted side effects of all this was the impact on the council’s budget? He and I had to put money aside to advise constituents about their problems, and that cut into the vital services that we were trying to deliver.

Drew Hendry: Indeed it did, and that is one of the manifest problems that I was going to come to. Universal credit is fuelling debt by default, leading some people to be evicted from their homes and placing others under stress due to the threat of eviction. Here is a list of the problems. There are delays, missed payments, poor communication, wrong payments, incorrect deductions, people left without money, people who do not know what is happening, and people who cannot work their way through the system. Universal credit hits the working, the low waged, the self-employed and the disabled, as well as those who are seeking work. At the universal credit summit that we held, we heard all those problems and more.

In the limited time that I have left, I want to make a few more points. The CAB-Macmillan partnership said, of people with terminal illness:

“We’ve not seen anybody fast-tracked through for an earlier payment. In fact we have seen people who are terminally ill dying before their Universal Credit is processed”.

How is that for a problem with universal credit? I have got pages of the stuff here, and I could, if I had the time, give lots more evidence about why universal credit is failing.

This debate is about the information, however. The project assessment reviews are detailed assessments of the implementation of universal credit. As has been said, the Information Commissioner’s Office “finds that the balance of the public interest supports disclosure of the requested information.” I pay tribute to John Slater for his tenacity. He deserves the right to access this information. The least the Government can do is to publish the information, but so far they have failed to do so. The justification for why publication is not in the public interest is beyond me, if the Government are so confident about it. The ICO notes that “the reports provide a much greater insight than any information already available about the UCP, there are strong arguments for transparency and accountability for a programme which may affect 11 million UK citizens and process billions of pounds, which has had numerous reported failings in its governance.”

It is about time that people got the full story about universal credit. I can tell hon and right hon. Members whose constituencies have not experienced a lengthy period of universal credit that they will be glad to get that information before universal credit hits their constituents.

4.58 pm

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate, and it is always good to discuss universal credit in the House. As a
member of the Work and Pensions Committee, I want to make a minor point before I go on to more substantive arguments. The first I knew about the Committee’s involvement in the motion was when I saw the Order Paper this morning while I was having my breakfast. I understand that we are all politicians here, and that the Opposition do not want to give anyone unfair notice, but it would be a simple courtesy to give members of any Select Committee some advance warning that their Committee is being involved in such a motion. I am not asking for much—notice could be given even an hour before the Order Paper is published. We were all here until 1 o’clock this morning, but there was plenty of time to send an email. That is just a general point for this sort of debate, which the Opposition are absolutely entitled to call.

I would like to put it on record that I am very happy with the Secretary of State’s response and pleased that these documents will be shared with the Work and Pensions Committee. I certainly take it on agreement that we will receive the documents in confidence—I understand that we will not publish them ourselves—which I think is quite right. That said, I think that my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) made a good point when she said that the analysis in the reports is now slightly out of date. Opposition Members who are hoping that it will cast brilliant sunlight on the workings of universal credit will be disappointed.

There is a broader point, which has been raised by a number of Opposition Members, about whether the documents should be published. There is a live freedom of information request, so people have requested the documents and the DWP has declined to give them. The Information Commissioner has said that they should be handed over and the DWP has appealed, as it is fully entitled to do. If that ruling is upheld, the documents will be published; if it is overturned, they will be kept out of the public eye. The House should abide by that well-respected and well-established process—it was established under a Labour Government—which is tried and tested. This debate is really about greater transparency. I believe that we should always call on policy makers to reach for greater transparency, and it is the job of this House to hold them to account. That goes for policy makers on both sides.

We saw a very big investment in universal credit in the Budget—£1.5 billion. The Select Committee was delighted by and welcomed the arrival of that money. As the Red Book shows, it has been raised by reducing opportunities for tax evasion and avoidance—money well raised; money well spent. The shadow Secretary of State has said twice in this House that she thinks that that additional £1.5 billion represents just £1 in every £10 that has been taken out, and she strongly implied that she would like to put the rest of that money back. By my calculation, that is £13.5 billion that she would like to put into universal credit. I am all for putting more money into universal credit, as my colleagues and friends know, but I always like to know where the money will come from.

The Labour party has set itself a fiscal credibility rule, which means that if it gets into government it intends to balance day-to-day expenditure and borrow only for investment in infrastructure, homes, railways, roads, renewable energy and new technology. Anyone remotely familiar with the DWP budget will know that the Secretary of State does not have £13.5 billion in a jar on his shelf. There is no slack to be found there, which means the money would need to be found elsewhere. Those familiar with the Red Book will know that £13.5 billion is not easily found elsewhere either.

If the Labour party were to stick to its own fiscal credibility rule, it would have to raise £11.5 billion. Its manifesto commits £2 billion to universal credit, which it says is accounted for—the Institute for Fiscal Studies has a different view—which means that £11.5 billion is unaccounted for. I will happily take an intervention from any Opposition Front Benchers who can tell me where that £11.5 billion will come from.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Perhaps the hon. Gentleman, being new to this House, does not appreciate that mistakes made in one Department can often have financial consequences in another. Let me tell him the story of a constituent of mine who went eight weeks with no income—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Lady cannot tell a story in an intervention. I will allow her to make a very quick point.

Mrs Moon: My constituent had eight weeks with no income and three months with no rent. She was back on anti-depressants after five years of recovery. The consequences might not have been grave for universal credit, but they were huge for the health services in Wales and the local housing authority, and my constituent’s health was destroyed. If we get things wrong in one Department, there are consequences for others.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady has made her point.

Alex Burghart: I fully understand the hon. Lady’s point because of course there are knock-on consequences. I am also very sorry to hear that her constituent waited eight weeks for money, but we know that that should never happen when advance payments are available and people can receive money on the same day. The seven waiting days have now been removed. The process of test and learn shows that we can make changes and improve outcomes for people on universal credit.

If we listened to Opposition Front Benchers, we would find an £11.5 billion black hole in the spending plans for universal credit. That shows that, rather than a fiscal credibility rule, the rule is that Labour has no fiscal credibility.

It is important that we increase transparency. I would welcome a little more transparency when Select Committees are cited in motions. I believe in the Information Commissioner’s transparency processes, and I am sure that we would all welcome a little more transparency on how the Labour party would fill the epic black hole in its finances.

5.6 pm

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): Like other hon. Members, I congratulate the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) and the Labour party on securing the debate.
I am delighted that the Secretary of State will provide the assessments to the Chairman of the Select Committee on Work and Pensions and to the Committee. That will be valuable, though it would probably have been more helpful to provide them sooner because I suspect that many of the issues that the Secretary of State’s predecessors saw coming—certainly some that I flagged up when I was on the Work and Pensions Committee between 2010 and 2015—appear in the assessment documents. If that is the case, and the documents contain some of the issues that have caused so much difficulty that the Government have had to U-turn on them, I ask Committee members who are in the Chamber, and certainly the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), to point them out very directly to the Government. It would be ridiculous if some of the problems that I and the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth put to the then Secretary of State when I was last in this place have come to pass. If they were in the assessment documents and ignored, I would be extremely disappointed.

Ms Ghani: The hon. Gentleman mentioned a U-turn. When he was previously the MP for Eastbourne, is it correct that he voted in favour of universal credit in all its forms?

Stephen Lloyd: I appreciate the hon. Lady’s intervention because it gives me the opportunity to remind the House of the numerous times on the Select Committee that I pointed out to the then Secretary of State that if he did not change things around the auto-payment default to landlords and the six or seven-week delay, the policy would be a disaster. Explaining why I still went through the Lobby leads me to the Government’s most disastrous mistake on universal credit. In 2015, the then Chancellor gutted universal credit on the work allowance by £3 billion per annum. That shattered the making work pay principle. I see in the Budget that the Government are taking some lessons from our reminding them that the whole process was undermined.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman refers to the previous Chancellor. The problem we have with universal credit, as with other benefits, is that the Government have a target of cutting £12 billion from the benefits budget. That is why we have an imperfect system. They are trying to make the system work, but they are making a bad job of it.

Stephen Lloyd: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman’s intervention and he is quite right. My theory is that the then Chancellor expected the Liberal Democrats to do a little better in 2015, because he knew that we would not have allowed that £12 billion cut. However, we were not there to stop the Conservatives being absolutely idiotic on universal credit, and, frankly, on penalising the poor. The £12 billion cut gutted universal credit, but they continued with its introduction. We would have stopped both.

Let me return to the Budget. Apparently, the Budget was “listening”. The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions made representations to the Chancellor, because even the Conservatives began to realise that the fault lines in universal credit were causing the most shattering problems for our constituents. A number of hon. Members from both sides of the House have spoken very eloquently about the really quite appalling experiences that people are going through.

My key issue is this. The one reason why I supported universal credit, through gritted teeth and despite making constant representations when I was a member of the Select Committee—I know the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth agreed with me about some of the chunky elements—that was that the work allowance would make work pay. As I said, in 2015 the then Chancellor took out £3 billion a year. The current Chancellor obviously recognised that the work allowance had been slashed so much that it barely washed its face and certainly did not make work pay, so—I got this from the Local Government Association—the Budget allocated an extra £8 million to trial innovative approaches to help individuals on universal credit to earn more at work. That is a ridiculous amount—£8 million is 1%—when £3 billion was taken out every year for the next five years. I am looking at the Conservative party, which is allegedly the party of aspiration. Its Chancellor of the Exchequer put in £8 million. That is a recognition that universal credit is not working from the perspective of making work pay. It also shows the Conservative party’s utter bankruptcy with regard to really trying to put in place what could ultimately be a very good credit and benefit system. They are instead retaining its failings and not doing what is necessary to make a real difference. It really is very, very disappointing.

I have also heard from the Conservative party, “Obviouisly, we can’t really make the changes because technically it’s too difficult on the six weeks-five weeks.” Well, first they moved down a week, so that was a bit different from what they said a few weeks ago. The other point—there are no Democratic Unionist party Members here, but let me share this with other hon. Members—is that the DUP got an agreement a few years ago for universal credit to be paid every two weeks and for there to be a default to the landlord in private rental. Perhaps the DUP has a different computer. Does the Secretary of State know whether they have a completely different computer in Northern Ireland? Is it somehow a special DUP computer, or is it all based on the same system? My understanding is that it is based on the same system. If the DUP can ensure that payments are made every two weeks—this has been happening for years, even before they crept in to prop up this absurd Government—why is it impossible for us to have it in Britain, considering some of the absolutely desperate situations people have been suffering as a result of the long delays? Yes, there have been changes to advance payments, but my God we had to drag that out of the Government like we were pulling teeth.

Frankly, if the Government had actually listened over a year and a half ago, maybe even a few years ago when I was on the Work and Pensions Committee, we would not have gone through the elements of universal credit that resemble a moving car crash, and more importantly—this was put so eloquently by the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) and the right hon. Member for Birkenhead—who are not here, but their words—would have avoided the searing pain, hurt and frustration that they are currently experiencing. That was all because the Government were ideologically determined not to listen on some of the elements of
universal credit that we knew did not work and—back to this again—because of the appalling gutting of universal credit work allowances by £3 billion per annum.

I will say one other thing. This, combined with the benefits freeze, is affecting real people. The Child Poverty Action Group told me a few weeks ago that on average the 2 million single parents in this country will lose £2,380 per annum. That is too much money. We are all on good salaries in this place, but I would notice if two and a half grand was taken out of my salary—I really would. It is a scandal that a single parent on a low income is going to lose on average—some will lose more—£2,380. It is a scandal and cannot proceed. I urge the Secretary of State to go back to the Chancellor on the work allowances and the benefits freeze and, most of all, get universal credit right so that it can be the good benefit it was originally proposed to be, before you gutted it and cut it.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Before I call the next speaker, I will make two points. First, a great many people are using the word “you”. When one is in the Chamber and addressing the Minister, it is “the Minister” or “the Government”. “You” means the Chair. I have to say this most emphatically, because so many people are making that mistake. Secondly, there have been lots of interventions, so we are running out of time and I have to reduce the time limit to six minutes. I call Mr James Cartlidge.

5.16 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd), because he gives a certain nuanced view on the coalition. In my view, the Government should seek to reduce the benefits bill. It is not a badge of honour if a Government preside over ever-spiralling welfare bills; and I am proud that we have brought them under control, but I accept entirely that welfare reform has consequences.

I want to focus on the difficult subject of food banks. Two weeks ago, the Suffolk Free Press, my main local paper, ran a piece saying that since the introduction of universal credit in Sudbury on 18 October—the full service roll-out—there had been an increase in the number of referrals to food banks. I received an email from the jobcentre just before this debate, so I feel that I should quote it at length. It is the jobcentre’s stance on the suggestion of an increase. It states:

“It is true that there has been an increase in referrals to Sudbury Food bank with 17 people being referred from the jobcentre just before this debate, so I feel that I should quote it at length. It is the jobcentre’s stance on the suggestion of an increase. It states:

“It is true that there has been an increase in referrals to Sudbury Food bank with 17 people being referred from the jobcentre just before this debate, so I feel that I should quote it at length. It is the jobcentre’s stance on the suggestion of an increase. It states:

“Increasing the amount of advance payment to 100% of their expected first payment will help reduce the number of people that need to be referred to the food bank.”

That is the unvarnished truth, as it were. We all know that the people claiming these benefits are not wealthy. That is the whole point; they are not supposed to be. They are experiencing difficulties. Wages have been compressed across large parts of the western world—I do not pretend otherwise. The key for us is to come up with a system that ensures they can break out and go on to earn higher wages and attain a sustainably better standard of living.

Hugh Gaffney: Would the hon. Gentleman agree that the system is broken? Food bank use has so increased since his Government came to office that people are worried they will not have enough food this year.

James Cartlidge: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. However, the number of workless households in the United Kingdom is at an all-time low, and there is no greater indication that poverty is being beaten than a reduction in the number of workless households. We have made incredible progress. This is not a Dickensian Christmas; it is the Christmas when we have reached the lowest level of unemployment since before I was born, in 1974. [Interruption.]

The hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) is trying to intervene from a sedentary position. Let me simply say to her, as I have said in a previous debate on this subject and many times before, that I do not speak theoretically. Like other Conservative Members, I ran a small business before coming to the House. The hon. Lady talks about the effect on pay, but some members of my staff declined pay rises because they would lose so much in tax credit, and refused to work more than 16 hours a week. That was a huge problem, and it brings me to the main point of the debate.

If you want to reform welfare, you have to have a system that deals with inherited problems, particularly the 16-hour issue. The only way to do that without creating much more poverty, and much more dependence on food banks and the like, is to do precisely what I think we are trying to do, and give people incentives to earn more through work. If we give them universal support, they will have the encouragement and the skills to do better in the workplace. The other point about my local jobcentre is that it has been incredibly positive about that experience. This is a joined-up programme that does not just make work pay, but enables people to get more from work and to build a career.

Jamie Stone: May I amplify the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd)? Perhaps all Members on both sides of the House are uncomfortable, even within themselves, about the concept of food banks. When I was growing up, there were no food banks because we did not need them. Surely, ultimately, we all agree that they are an evil sight and we would rather it was not there.

James Cartlidge: The hon. Gentleman speaks as if he wanted to abolish food banks. They are run by a charity that is helping people in need, and I have no problem with that. I accept that even in the wealthiest districts of

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the wealthiest countries in the world there will be people who are struggling for one reason or another, and it is good that there is that sort of provision. The duty of the Government is to build broad policy that encourages people to improve their position in life, to earn higher wages, and to get on.

Luke Graham: As has been acknowledged several times in the House, just over 1.1 million people in the UK used food banks in the last year. In Germany, where pay and benefits are higher, the figure is 1.5 million every week. Although there may be some individual cases, food bank usage is a structural issue. It is not solely down to universal credit.

James Cartlidge: My hon. Friend has made a good point. As I said earlier, the issue of the compression of wages in certain parts of the economy is a global phenomenon. It has been seen in the United States, in particular.

Let me end by raising an important issue that I have not heard a single Opposition Member mention in all our debates on this subject. The purpose of welfare reform is not to pay out more in benefits; it is to help people into work, and that is something that we should be thinking about.

In Suffolk, we have a real problem with finding people to pick fruit in our local growing sector, and I understand that in Cornwall fruit is rotting in fields because EU workers are going home and there are not enough people to pick it. Although unemployment is very low—and I am proud of that—more than 10,000 people are unemployed in Suffolk and Cornwall, yet we say that there is no one to pick our natural abundance. I do not understand why not a single Opposition Member, at any point during any debate on welfare, ever comes up with a way to reform the system, to encourage work, and to incentivise people to go out there and get it. Moreover, I am afraid that we should consider the other side of the issue: sometimes we need stick as well as carrot. There are people who are not taking work that is available, and in my view they should be.

Neil Gray: The hon. Gentleman’s right hon. Friend, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith)—who designed universal credit—has said that work allowances need to be restored to retain an incentive to work as part of universal credit. Does he not accept that?

James Cartlidge: I think that the benefits system remains extremely generous. The difficulty for the Government is that they inherited a system in which millions of people have been taken through tax credit and made unnecessarily dependent on benefits. It is incredibly difficult to wean people off that dependency, and you do not do it by paying out more and more in benefits; all that you do is get the country into ever greater debt. I am proud that we have made the progress that we have made, but it is a difficult issue.

I am trying to focus on the fact that we are starting to see labour shortages in areas where we have 10,000 unemployed. What is going on? What malfunction is occurring in our so-called social security system? For me, the answer is not a softening of the welfare system or the increase in benefit payments that the Opposition are calling for, because that would create even less incentive for people to go out to work. We need to understand how we are going to fill those positions as we head into Brexit and turn off the tap of cheap labour from abroad. How are we going to fill those positions with people from this country? We will have to take some very difficult decisions in regard to the economically inactive and those who remain on unemployment benefit. If the Opposition cannot see that, it shows that they did not learn any lessons when they were in government. They left us with the deficit that caused the whole mess to start off with, and they need to start understanding that welfare is not just about paying more benefits. It is about encouraging people into work and reforming the system.

5.25 pm

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): I want to thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), who is not here at the moment, for speaking so openly. This is 2017. How can stories like that be commonplace? As we have just heard, universal credit is a perfect example of how this Government can detach themselves from the very real suffering that they have inflicted on their citizens, through the blinkered belief that they know what is best. Their main argument is to discredit the previous tax credit system, saying that it encouraged people not to enter work. As someone who had to rely on that tax credit system, I believe that I am somewhat more qualified to tell the Government about some of the real problems in the system. They include low wages, high childcare costs, huge rental expenses and extortionate bills.

The Government set about trying to label people like me as scroungers or shirkers. They should try hearing every day how people like me should not have children if they cannot afford them. Single parents, the sick and disabled are penalised by a Government who think it is okay to demonise those who are struggling, while the people controlling the system avoid paying taxes and get richer and richer. And when we call the Government out, they tell us we are scaremongering. That is their rhetoric, but this is life.

Universal credit is a system that supposedly incentivises people to get back into the workplace. Do the Government actually know what that looks like? I say to Government Members that people have no choice but to take jobs on zero-hours contracts or temporary work that could cease at any moment. They have to rely on that insecure work, while private landlords will not touch them with a bargepole. If the Government prioritised creating secure jobs with decent pay, helping families to get into safe, secure and affordable housing and helping parents practically with childcare costs, they would soon find that they had a more productive workforce and that the economy grew.

My constituency of Crewe and Nantwich had full universal credit rolled out in July this year. I will share some of the so-called success stories that have come into my office. I have a constituent who is a single parent with two children. She went to university and now works full-time in the prison service. She has to put both children into full-time childcare, but the childminders require payment up front, so the week she started her job, she had to get an overdraft to pay the
childminding fees. She made an application for universal credit, but before her first payment was even received, she had to pay for the childcare again, which was the equivalent of her take-home wage. At that stage, she had nothing. She had no wages left and no overdraft to dip into as it was totally maxed out. She was taking out loans just to feed her children, and by the time her payment came, it was only two weeks before the childcare fees were due again. She went to university to better herself and to provide for her children, but the system has plunged her into poverty and made her reliant on high interest payday loans. We put in a food bank referral for her, but she struggled to collect the parcel because of her work commitments. Thankfully, my office was able to arrange for it to be delivered; otherwise, her family would have gone hungry.

Another example is Cornelli, a self-employed mum with a child of two and a new addition on the way. She is building a photography business. With her previous disability premium under the new system.

Finally, another example of the Government’s “success” is the situation faced by Mr Rodgers, who had issues with his previous employer, who paid him for three months’ work in one lump sum. Despite him uploading the wage slip to that effect on his journal, those administering universal credit now think he earned much more money in one month than he did and as such is not entitled to universal credit for that month. Had he been paid monthly, he would have been entitled to a payment each month.

Universal credit is not tailored to meet the reality of the UK economy. It needs to be adapted to be able to deal with changes in circumstances as and when they happen. Given the Government’s refusal to pause and fix universal credit despite a unanimous motion in this House supporting a pause, it is even more vital that they come clean with their own assessment of the risks involved.

I stand here as a voice for my constituents, who are living and breathing this flawed system, and ask again: listen to them, please—this simply is not fair.

5.31 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): First, I want to comment on what was said by the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field). Having been in a similar position as a staff officer for a Member of the Scottish Parliament, I well understand how a situation like the one he described can affect people. I also want to associate myself with the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) regarding the awareness of Work and Pensions Committee members of the Committee’s involvement in today’s motion; it would have been nice to have been alerted of our involvement, but we will let that go.

This is the fourth time we have spoken on universal credit since the election. As I said in my last contribution to the debate, that is a not a bad thing given how important and wide-ranging universal credit is, and how much impact it will have across the country. However, unlike on previous occasions, today is the first time we have heard from at least some on the Opposition Benches a partial acknowledgment of the good work being done by this Government.

As a member of the Work and Pensions Committee, I am extremely pleased that the Government have listened to our recommendations and removed the seven-day waiting period at the beginning of the process, extended the repayment timetable for advance payments, and carried housing benefit across for two weeks, which, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen), who is not in her place, said, is tremendous.

Today, however, we are debating the publication of the project assessment reviews. As the Secretary of State set out, there is a need, recognised by the Public Accounts Committee, that confidential sensitive data must be protected for commercial and other reasons. I do not think anybody with any reasonable sense would deny that. This is in the public interest, but, as has also been said, there has to be a balance. So I welcome the announcement that the Government will agree to publish the papers to the Select Committee of which I am a member, and I am looking forward to my Christmas recess reading.

We have come a long way with universal credit, and I pay tribute to my colleagues on the Committee, who have been persistent but, I believe, constructive in moving this debate forward. I also pay tribute to the Secretary of State and the Department for showing by their actions a willingness to listen and move on issues that it agreed need to be moved on. The most responsible way for the Government to proceed now—as they are—is to take the roll-out at a steady pace and to stay the course, minimising uncertainty. This policy has been a long time in the making, and the Government are taking the right approach: rolling out universal credit slowly, listening to Members on all sides of the House, to the Work and Pensions Committee and to DWP staff, and making changes to address issues as and when they emerge.

I think everyone agrees that in a perfect world the five-week waiting period would be reduced to four weeks, which would then mirror the way that most people are paid—monthly in arrears. The issue here is not a political will or ideology, but is a technical matter which would be faced by any Government. However, the Government are compensating for this practicality issue with not only the lifeline of advance payments, but the housing benefit carry-over. The seven-day waiting period has been scrapped, the taper rate has been cut, the phone helplines are now free, advance payments are substantial and easy to receive, and people are significantly more likely to move into work than those on the old system—a system under which it made sense to work for only 16 hours a week, trapping people in the benefits system.

I find it difficult to believe that the Opposition want to see the documents simply to make constructive, realistic proposals to improve the policy. It could be that they are searching for headlines and to make political capital when the Government are pressing ahead, slowly and in a listening mode, with a policy that will affect many lives for the better, and building a
welfare system that works and will help support all our constituents who are in need of it. Announcing today that the project assessment reviews will be published to the Work and Pensions Committee is yet another display of the constructive approach being taken by this Government to this incredibly important policy.

5.35 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): On Monday last week, I spoke in the Chamber to propose a ten-minute rule Bill to try to tackle some of the organisational and administrative issues that have made universal credit worse. The most important thing that has been discussed in all these universal credit debates is obviously the waiting time and, like others, I welcome the Chancellor’s reducing it to five weeks. However, contrary to what was claimed by the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross), 25% of universal credit claimants are waiting longer than six weeks now. That is a DWP figure, so it is simply not the case that no one is waiting longer than five weeks. I also welcome the increase in the advance loans to 100% and the stretching of the payback to a year, but those changes do not come in until next year. People in my constituency, which was hit on Budget day, will face exactly the same set-up that has been discussed repeatedly today.

Last Monday, I proposed some of the flexible options put forward by the Scottish Government, such as fortnightly payments and direct payments to landlords, and I call in particular for separate payments. While the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) said that they are not any use, separate payments are being promoted by women’s charities as a way of avoiding financial control and manipulation. However, a ten-minute rule Bill can only discuss the things around the edges, and universal credit has major underlying problems. It is often described as simple, but rolling so many different types of people on to one benefit has proven difficult. The majority of people on universal credit includes working people who will be receiving child tax credits and working tax credits through universal credit. As has been said, the benefit will eventually be collected by 11 million people, so it is important to get things right before it reaches that scale.

One of the main issues is the benefit freeze until 2020. Inflation is already over 3% and is expected to climb due to Brexit. The average loss of earnings for unemployed people will be £500 a year, but the figure for employed households is £1,200 a year. Of that loss, 57% is due to the change in the work allowance. If the Government want to make work pay, they should return to what was proposed in 2013 and fix the work allowance. The grotesque rape clause has been well aired by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), but it is simply an exemption to another big issue: the two-child limit on tax credits. Three-quarters of a million families with three children or more will lose more than £2,500 a year, and that includes a quarter of a million one-earner families who will lose more than £3,800 a year. With the kind of income that such families have, that loss is enormous. We have already seen the number of children living in poverty increase by 400,000, and any medic or social scientist will talk about the impact that the change will have on children’s lives and how it will cost more in the long term.

The Women’s Budget Group has shown that 86% of all the cuts made over the past seven years have been felt by women, who tend to be at the lower end of the income scale, and by black, Asian and minority ethnic women in particular, which may be aggravated by cultural factors because they may have three or more children. The hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) talked about family planning, and no one can predict the moment at which life can change. People cannot suddenly put their child in a bin because their circumstances have changed or they have been made redundant—that is ridiculous.

My Bill called on the Government to carry out cumulative impact assessments that consider gender and race. We have been calling for the roll-out to be paused and fixed, and we have heard in the past week that it will be paused, but it will be paused between February and April. Good luck to those whose constituencies will not be hit, as mine is, going into the Christmas and new year period, but why is the roll-out not being paused now so that, as we go through the hardest bit of winter, the reforms agreed by the Chancellor can be enacted? The roll-out needs to be changed, and the pause should be now, not next February.

5.40 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s response earlier this afternoon, not least on the release of the project assessment reports on which the motion focuses.

The Secretary of State addressed the need for transparency and scrutiny, and he highlighted how the Public Accounts Committee and others have scrutinised universal credit. I am sure universal credit will continue to be scrutinised both in this Chamber and in Committee as we continue with the roll-out, as is right and proper. He also mentioned the importance of not weakening any commercial negotiating position, of protecting information, as appropriate, and of making sure that we maintain an effective system in the public interest. It is important that the right balance continues to be struck in our deliberations.

I welcome the Secretary of State’s announcement that he will provide the papers to the Work and Pensions Committee; as he said, it is important to recognise that this is an exceptional request. The assessments will be provided subject to redaction and on a confidential basis, but their release gives the Select Committee the opportunity to see the information.

I have contributed to previous debates on universal credit, which is fundamentally about creating a welfare system that helps people into work and supports those who need help while being fair to those who pay for it. We introduced universal credit to ensure that work always pays. Merging six benefits into one simpler, fairer system makes sense. Jobseekers are able to spend more time looking for work. They are more likely to consider jobs and, compared with the old system, they are taking on more jobs or hours.

Stephen Lloyd: I totally endorse what the hon. Lady says about making work pay. What is her answer to my charge earlier that, from 2015, the Government have been taking £3 billion per annum from universal credit via the work allowance? Does that make work pay?
Wendy Morton: At the heart of universal credit is a system that makes work pay and helps people into work. One of the fundamental things it does is give people more support in their local jobcentre.

Since the start of the roll-out of universal credit, this Government have continued to listen and have continued to review the programme. In many circumstances, new projects and new programmes have to be continually reviewed as they go along, and this Government are doing exactly the right thing.

When it comes to getting people into work, alongside having people to help and support them through that process, a good education is fundamental. We must not lose sight of the fact that, under this Government, there are more than 1.9 million more children in good or outstanding schools, and standards are rising. The number of children in workless households is now at a 20-year low.

We have created more than 3 million apprenticeships since May 2010, and we have committed to delivering 3 million apprenticeships between 2015 and 2020. Those apprenticeships are developing skills for the workplace. They are helping people into work, helping people stay in work, helping our businesses to develop for the future and helping to develop our economy. Whereas under Labour the number of young people not in education, employment or training went up by a third, unemployment is now at its lowest since 1975. This Government are creating the opportunities for young people. When there are jobs and apprenticeships, that also helps jobcentres to get people into work.

Reforms to the skills and education system are also important in making sure that young people are equipped to get those jobs. We need to invest in technology and in skills that will help and support people, and help this country thrive in new and emerging economies. It is this Government who are helping people, which is why I am disappointed to have sat through a lot of this debate and heard scaremongering stories from Opposition Members. I do not think that helps anybody. It does not help those people who on benefit or those who may be needing to go on to UC. We should be working constructively, working together to create those opportunities for everybody to benefit.

In my constituency, we do not yet have UC, but a lot of preparation is already going on in advance of the roll-out. It is being done through our jobcentre, which I visited a few months ago, when I was really impressed by the hard work and effort the people there were putting in to get ready for the moment of roll-out next year. I was impressed at how they were already starting, through their systems and their local knowledge, to identify the people who might need that little extra support to find their way through the new system—that is important. Our local housing association, Walsall Housing Group, is already starting to make preparations and look at helping people through this transition period. So let us not lose sight of that. There are always sad cases and people who get into difficulties, and the system has to be there for them, but let us also not forget that, despite the protestations from Opposition Members, there are many positive stories. My hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) is not in her place, but she has had the roll-out in her constituency and she can see the benefits it is bringing.

Time is short, so I am going to end on one important quote from the Trussell Trust. On the Budget, it said:

“We welcome the Chancellor’s announcement today of a package to address concerns around the operational delivery of Universal Credit. Cutting the waiting time by seven days, modifying the advance payment system, and ensuring that people will continue receiving housing benefit for two weeks after moving onto the new system, will ease the pressure on thousands of households”.

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for securing this debate and pursuing this issue. This is probably going to be the last time I speak in this place on this issue before UC is rolled out in my constituency on 13 December. That is a daunting prospect, not because I have just made things up or because I am scaremongering, but because of everything that every advice and support agency in my constituency has told me about this system.

I also want to refute some of the things that have been said by Conservative Members. This is about people in work. They talk about people getting into work quicker, but more than 50% of people on UC are in work, so this is a problem for those people. I refute the idea that this is not about austerity, because the Institute for Fiscal Studies has said that by 2022 £12 billion will come from the welfare budget. If that is not about austerity, I do not know what is. Before campaigning on an issue, you must be sure you are doing it in the best interest of all your constituents and that it is something important to them. I am absolutely convinced that UC is one such issue.

It is right that we separate the delivery of this system from the design, because the people in jobcentres could not be working any harder to prepare for this roll-out. The idea that when jobcentre staff get a visit from a Member from the ruling party they are able to sit down and tell them, in all its glory, about the difficulties and the problems they are facing just completely ignores the power dynamics between that member of staff and somebody from this place.

Several hon. Members rose—

Laura Pidcock: I will not give way. If you do not acknowledge that power dynamics exist—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Lady must not say you. I advise everyone else who has a speech written out to look through it and score out the yous.

Laura Pidcock: Conservative Members will not acknowledge that power dynamics sometimes prevent the truth from being heard.

Dr Whitford: Is the issue not partly the fact that we hear Members talking about meeting DWP staff, but they then say that they do not have the full roll-out? They should come back to talk in the Chamber when they do.

Laura Pidcock rose—

Several hon. Members rose—
Laura Pidcock: I am not going to give way, so Conservative Members should save their energy.

Colleagues on the Opposition Benches have conveyed their deep unrest at the system, not to score political points but to try to get the Government to see what we see: people in work and out of work enduring what is essentially an ill-thought-out experiment. It is an experiment built on deeply flawed assumptions about what causes worklessness and what creates low pay. It is based on a deeply flawed model of what traps people in a cycle of debt and financial crisis, and it is a deeply flawed ideology that labels workers and people unable to work with the worst of motivations rather than the best, created by people who, if I am honest, know little or nothing about poverty and what it means to struggle in that poverty.

Leaving aside the ideological differences, the practical issues are enough to go on alone. We have listed them in this place time and again. We have had meetings with the Secretary of State. We have written letters and held evidence sessions. We have listened cumulatively to thousands and thousands of people, from claimants to advice agencies, about the chaos the system brings, and we have witnessed the fear that people are experiencing or anticipating.

Let me say what is still wrong with the system: the wait is still too long, the advance payments are still a loan, the disability premium remains removed, explicit consent is still a barrier and universal credit still penalises people with fluctuating wages. There is still uncertainty about claimants’ entitlement to free school meals, prescription exemptions and Healthy Start vouchers. Private landlords are still wary about having universal credit claimants as tenants and housing associations are still anticipating arrears. So, I was not cheering and whooping at the Chancellor’s announcements. On all the things we raised that the Government conceded on, there was originally no acknowledgement that there was a problem.

On behalf of my constituents, I would like to know why the Government are rolling out this system in Consett and Crook jobcentres on 13 December. Who thought that was a sensible idea? Who on earth signed it off? I still do not have an answer to that. At a time of increased costs because of all the difficulties of winter, who signed that off?

The Opposition, backed by some brilliant campaign groups, have won victories against the Government, including concessions on phone-line charges, the increase in advance payment entitlement and the repayment schedule, and the removal of the seven-day waiting period. But let us be under no illusions at all: the Government would not have conceded on any of those points were it not for the political pressure and the activism of those groups. We need more popular resistance to the “to the barricades” speech of the hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock). I can assure her that if she joined me in visiting DWP staff at Randolphfield, Stirling, she would find that they are far from supine, as she alleges. They will absolutely tell me what is going on, and I count on that and am grateful for it.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): To suggest that DWP workers, who work with such integrity and courage in Tonbridge and other areas around my constituency, do not speak out when they are asked is to malign them. These are people with integrity and courage who work incredibly hard.

Laura Pidcock: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I said that members of the Department for Work and Pensions work very, very hard. I did not—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order.

Laura Pidcock: I am not going to give way, so Conservative Members should save their energy.

Colleagues on the Opposition Benches have conveyed their deep unrest at the system, not to score political points but to try to get the Government to see what we see: people in work and out of work enduring what is essentially an ill-thought-out experiment. It is an experiment built on deeply flawed assumptions about what causes worklessness and what creates low pay. It is based on a deeply flawed model of what traps people in a cycle of debt and financial crisis, and it is a deeply flawed ideology that labels workers and people unable to work with the worst of motivations rather than the best, created by people who, if I am honest, know little or nothing about poverty and what it means to struggle in that poverty.

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Stephen Kerr: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Laura Pidcock: I am not giving way to Government Members. I have heard enough of their contributions about my community. I have sat here for hours. I want to say my piece and then continue to listen to the rest of the debate.

The Select Committee will not have time to analyse the evidence. The announcements that were made by the Chancellor will not take effect until next year, so they mean nothing to the people in my constituency. I beg this Government to please pause the roll-out in North West Durham.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I am pleased to follow the “to the barricades” speech of the hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock). I can assure her that if she joined me in visiting DWP staff at Randolphfield, Stirling, she would find that they are far from supine, as she alleges. They will absolutely tell me what is going on, and I count on that and am grateful for it.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): To suggest that DWP workers, who work with such integrity and courage in Tonbridge and other areas around my constituency, do not speak out when they are asked is to malign them. These are people with integrity and courage who work incredibly hard.

Laura Pidcock: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I said that members of the Department for Work and Pensions work very, very hard. I did not—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. That is not a point of order. If the hon. Lady wishes to make that point, she will have to intervene on the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), who currently has the Floor. Whether or not he takes her intervention would be a matter of great interest.

Stephen Kerr: I can assure the House that the professionalism and dedication of DWP staff are not in question. I especially pay tribute to DWP staff in Stirling, who are doing a magnificent job in delivering this radical change—there is no question but that it is a massive change. That is why the Government are taking their approach to rolling it out, for which I applaud them.

I also warmly welcome the changes that were announced in the Budget. They went a very long way to meeting the concerns that I and other Members have expressed to the Government. I welcome the Secretary of State’s
speech, and I also compliment the Minister for Employment for the detail that he continues to give to all of us who have a genuine interest in the success of universal credit. It is a major reform and it is long overdue. As we have rehearsed so often in these debates, it is a programme that encourages and facilitates a return to work by mirroring the world of work through its processes.

Of course problems arise when there is such a dramatic change, especially when it comes to the vulnerable in our society. When we try to encourage people to cope with making their own decisions and to stand on their own two feet, it is not easy, but that is the whole essence of welfare—to help people to help themselves. Surely that is a noble objective to which we can all subscribe.

Time is against me, but I want to mention some specific points that I would like the Minister to consider. DWP staff used to have a database of people—I believe that it was called the Apollo list—whom they could speak to about a specific case, but that ceased to exist in June. One of the main problems that remains is the capacity of DWP staff to talk to individuals—I am thinking about more than one for a particular case. I ask that this list of accredited and trusted partners is reinstated so that DWP staff can talk to a wider range of people, whom I would describe as being in the circle of concern for claimants, particularly those who struggle, who have learning difficulties or disabilities, or who, frankly—I say this with the greatest of respect—lead what can only be described as a chaotic lifestyle and need additional help.

Secondly money can be recouped from universal credit payments for a variety of bona fide reasons—council tax arrears, rent arrears, sheriff court fines or whatever. That is all well and good, but there has to be closer scrutiny of the minimum amount that people can be left to live on, otherwise we can cause unintended hardship. I would like to see a little more discretion in how those deductions are made.

Thirdly there have been some instances of universal credit overpayments. In such cases, there are attempts to recover the money, which is right and proper, but it feels as though DWP staff had more discretion in the past about how they went about recovering money. I would like the DWP to consider how it organises its staff to operate in front of claimants.

Fourthly, there is the issue of overpayments relating to local housing allowances. In some cases, payments have been made on the basis of full rent, but then there has been a reference to the local housing allowance, and it is discovered that there have been overpayments. There is then a request for a refund. Frankly, the process gets rather messy, because people have usually either spent the money, or paid it in rent. Perhaps these things could be addressed more directly and quickly if there were a circle of concern and a greater possibility of intervention by accredited partners.

Another concern I will add to my list is about the DWP’s capacity to provide visiting officers and outreach in rural areas. It is undoubtedly the case that applicants from rural areas face difficulties when they are required to attend jobcentres for interview, ID verification or ongoing appointments. The whole experience of going into DWP offices can be too much for some people. I am only talking about small numbers, but if the programme is to be a success, I ask Opposition Members to stop trying to pull this whole thing down—we need to be attentive to the needs of the most vulnerable.

**Jamie Stone:** I refer yet again to my vast and very remote constituency. I wholeheartedly endorse the hon. Gentleman’s point, because I have visited DWP staff in Wick in my constituency. I recognise how hard they are working and that they are doing their very best, but travelling to meet clients—if that is what we call them—in the far north-west of Sutherland is an almost impossible task.

**Stephen Kerr:** That is one dimension. Another aspect that I am trying to highlight is the fact that some people need to be visited in their homes, but the DWP does not have the capacity to do that. For example, there are only two people who make such visits in the whole Forth Valley area, and they are overworked.

The process when someone is required to present themselves to provide ID verification can get a bit messy, as people do not always have the ID that they need. Not everyone has a passport or a driving licence, so further interventions are required from other agencies. It is logical for a patient to ask their GP to verify their ID, because surgeries can produce documents, but GP surgeries in my constituency are saying, “Hang on, that’s not our job. We’re not going to give you this information because it is really the DWP that should be talking to us about your identity.” The suggestion that some GP surgeries might begin to charge for such services causes me grave concern.

Time is against me, so I will conclude on the issue of joint claims and split payments. I have concerns about the way in which these payments are being handled. I have spoken to a number of women’s charities, such as Stirling and District Women’s Aid, that have explained why we need to adopt a more flexible approach to split payments. For example, payments for joint claimants should made into either a joint bank account or separate bank accounts. That would protect the most vulnerable people in society—women with young children who are on the receiving end of a rather brutal existence at the hands of some miscreant men.

Finally, we should not be afraid of measurement and reporting, so I welcome the Government’s approach to that. When performance is measured, it improves, and when that performance is reported, the rate of improvement accelerates. That cannot be a bad thing.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** Order. The time limit on Back-Bench speeches will have to be reduced to five minutes, with immediate effect.

**6.4 pm**

**Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It was the former hon. Member for Foyle, Mark Durkan, who is sadly missed in this place, who once referred to Opposition day debates as being like a silent disco: the Opposition talk about the motion on the Order Paper, and Government Members talk about something that might have a tenuous link to the motion on the Order Paper. In this debate, some Conservative Members—rather naughtily I thought, Mr Speaker—have questioned occupants of the Chair as to whether the motion is actually in order. I should have thought that the fact that it is on the Order Paper would suggest that it is in order.
[Chris Stephens]

Given that this is pantomime season, we have seen a competition on the Government Benches as to who their top pantomime villain is—[Interruption.] Well, he was pulled up. We almost, but not quite, had the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) suggesting some sort of corporal punishment for the unemployed when he was talking about using the big stick. I thought that that was completely and utterly outrageous.

James Cartlidge: I was simply saying that, when we have a massive lack of labour—for picking fruit, for example—and thousands of people unemployed, we have to ask ourselves what is wrong in the benefit system that we are not getting people to fill those positions. That is not calling for corporal punishment; it is a perfectly fair thing to ask for.

Chris Stephens: I asked a number of my hon. Friends before I rose to speak whether the hon. Gentleman seemed to suggest some sort of corporal punishment, and I have to say that they thought that he did.

I want to talk about the Information Commissioner, because what has happened is quite strange. The DWP appealed to the Information Commissioner over the publication of a 2011 report and then went to the first-tier tribunal, but the appeal was not upheld. Having been told that it had to publish that report, why is the Department now blocking further such reports—from May 2012, February 2013, June 2013, March 2014 and March 2015? I hope that the Minister will explain why the Department, having previously lost decisions at tribunal and been forced to respond to freedom of information requests, is choosing to appeal now.

The report from the Information Commissioner is particularly devastating for the Government. It even quotes a National Audit Office report, saying that it stated that a project assessment review report from February 2013

“raised serious concerns about the UCP which lead ‘to a reset of the programme between February and May 2013.’”

I think the Work and Pensions Committee, of which I am a member, has the right to review these reports, and also to look quite specifically at what recommendations have been brought forward and which of them the Department has not acted on. Could the issues covered include telephone calls and telephone charges—something I have been campaigning about since I came to this place two and a half years ago? Has a previous report suggested that calls to the Department for Work and Pensions should be free? Have recommendations been made, for example, regarding the difficulty faced by those who have to rely on a text relay operator or to use Minicom services—another issue I have raised recently? The Select Committee heard rather disturbing evidence of people having to use the text relay operator service who waited 45 to 50 minutes to contact someone, but found that they were hung up on. That is something the Department should urgently address, and the same applies to Minicom services. Did these project assessment reviews look at the closure of jobcentres? We have seen the Department’s proposals for the closure of hundreds of jobcentres across the UK.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: While I share my hon. Friend’s outrage, he surely cannot be surprised. When it came to the closure of half of Glasgow’s jobcentres, not a single equality impact assessment was published, despite calls for the Department to do so.

Chris Stephens: I agree entirely. There is a significant problem of equality impact assessments not being published, not only by the Department for Work and Pensions but across the board. Last year, I tabled parliamentary questions to each and every UK Government Department and found that not one equality impact assessment had been carried out under their change and reform programmes.

Universal credit potentially affects 11 million UK citizens. That is why I look forward to the Select Committee receiving these reports and checking whether the Government acted on the recommendations that we had provided to them. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) that the reports should not just be going to the Select Committee, because the general public have a right to review them to find out whether the Government have been acting on their recommendations.

There has been a lot of heat in the debate on universal credit. We have heard some suggestions that food banks are a good thing, but food banks are not part of the social security system of this country. In 2010, 61,400 food parcels were delivered to citizens across the UK. The figure for this year, so far, is 1,182,594. If there can be any suggestion at all that austerity is working, it certainly does not seem to be working for the poorest and most vulnerable in our society.

6.11 pm

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak on this subject yet again. As we have heard, it is the sixth debate on universal credit in this Parliament and the fourth in the past eight weeks. This gives me another opportunity to reiterate my support for universal credit, which encourages people to get into work and supports them while they are in work, with the overriding aim of simplifying an overly bureaucratic and complicated system by rolling six benefits into one.

However, the title of this debate is slightly different from the others, referring as it does to project assessment reviews carried out between 2012 and 2015, and subsequent documents as well. I wondered what the reason was for that. I suspect that the answer lies in three points. First, Labour Members think that there is a clever parliamentary tactic in tabling motions of this sort. Secondly, no particular benefit can be gained by looking at documents dating back to 2012 to 2015. That point has been made by other hon. Members, and it must be right—we have moved on significantly since then.

Thirdly, Labour Members appear not to believe in the advantages of the universal credit system, as we have heard again in some of the speeches this afternoon. They risk sounding as though they think that the legacy system was all perfect whereas this system is not. That is not right. The legacy system was complex and bureaucratic. It trapped people into working for a limited period of only 16 hours. I am sure that we have all had constituents, as I have, who did not take on additional work because they calculated that they were better off staying on benefits in the legacy system than getting into work. I do not criticise that, because it was a perfectly logical
and reasonable decision to make—I criticise the legacy system and the position that my constituents were put in at the time.

Ruth George: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that under the tax credits system, working people could earn up to £5,000 a year more and still keep their working tax credit without losing a penny of it? I very much hope that he advised his constituents of that when they came to him for advice.

Michael Tomlinson: The “big bang” roll-out of the tax credits system was an absolute disaster that many of our constituents had to live through for a number of years.

I am disappointed that this motion fails to mention and to acknowledge the good words that we heard from the Chancellor—and not just words, but the additional £1.5 billion that was put in. Some hon. Members have mentioned it, but it could have been put into the motion. The shadow Secretary of State did say that she welcomed those measures, but what she said sounded a little bit mealy-mouthed, certainly to my ears. The hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) gave the full quote—has he always done. He said that he was short of time, and I wish that he had had more time to develop his speech and take more interventions. It was a shame that he did not, because he was correct to say that the principle of universal credit is absolutely right. It was good to hear the SNP’s support for it.

In relation to the Budget, I have welcomed the £1.5 billion extra and the reduction in the waiting period. I want the Minister to address this specific question: can he confirm that there was a seven-day wait in the legacy system, and that we have now reduced the wait to zero days, making it shorter than it was even under the legacy system? I particularly welcome, as other Members have done, the payment of two weeks’ housing benefit element, which will not be repayable. That will help the most vulnerable to transition on to universal credit. Too often, during the debate, we heard reference to five weeks’ or six weeks’ wait, but we have not had clarity about the fact that people can get a payment within five days of applying, or even on the day. I am sure that the Minister will confirm that when he gets to his feet.

I welcome the additional support, and it is disappointing that people have not been more vocal about it. But Citizens Advice Scotland, Citizens Advice, the chief executive of St Mungo’s and the chief executive of the Trussell Trust—my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) gave the full quote—have all voiced their support for the scheme.

I would like to mention another myth: the allegation that the universal credit hotline was a premium phone line, which of course it is not. I would be grateful if the Minister confirmed that the hotline is now free, and that by the end of the year all phone calls to the Department will be free. I welcome the opportunity to set out the advantages of the system and the additional money that has gone in to help the most vulnerable to transition on to universal credit. We should look to transfer the most vulnerable not only on to universal credit, but into work, and I believe that that is what the system does.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Five hon. Members are still seeking to catch my eye. I have no difficulty at all with each of them speaking for five minutes, but I warn them that their Front Benchers might, as the winding-up speeches will start late. If they are unbothered by the imperious glances of those who sit in front of them, so am I.

6.17 pm

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): As someone who has worked for the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers on behalf of low-paid shop workers for nearly 20 years, I have been banging on about universal credit for many a year. It is a pleasure to see so many Members across both sides of the House taking such an interest in the policy. We are not surprised by that, because the policy will affect not just the 7 million households who will become claimants—an average of 10,800 households in each constituency—but the 2.5 million households who are currently on legacy benefits and who will cease to receive anything because of the cuts to universal credit.

I welcome the constructive comments made by Members on both sides of the House about universal credit, and I have always tried to be constructive when I address the policy. I have set up the all-party group on universal credit, and I am pleased to see contributions being made to that group by Members from all parts of the House. I sit on the Work and Pensions Committee, which will be pleased to receive the report.

If the Government are open about scrutiny and they really want to learn and fix universal credit, why are they not publishing an impact assessment on it? It is not just about the reports; we last had an impact assessment on universal credit five years ago, almost to the day. Since then, almost £5 billion a year has been cut from that policy. The last impact assessment for universal credit stated:

“A comprehensive evaluation programme is being developed…The evaluation will need to meet the immediate need for feedback and evidence on implementation issues”.

Apparently, the evaluation programme will include “ongoing monitoring, evaluation and analysis; a ‘live running review’ of implementation and delivery; a fuller evaluation of implementation and delivery and ongoing analysis of outcomes and impacts.”

I want the Minister to answer this question when he replies to the debate: where are those assessments of universal credit that the impact assessment of December 2012 said would be put in place? Have they actually been produced? If not, why not? If they have been produced, following that commitment, why have they not been published? Why have we waited for five years and seen £5 billion of cuts but still not seen any evidence from the Conservative party on how universal credit is affecting the hundreds of thousands of people now receiving it, and on how it will affect millions in future?

At the very least there should have been an assessment of the impact of those cuts from the July 2015 Budget. That Budget cut £3.2 billion from work allowances and nearly £1.5 billion with the two-child policy, but it was left to the IFS to tell us that 3 million working households with children will be £2,500 a year worse off and that work incentives for single parents and couples who both
work are actually weakened under universal credit now that the work allowances have been cut.

Unlike under tax credits, if universal credit claimants work overtime, their next month’s universal credit payment is docked by 63% of whatever they earn. Where is the work incentive in that? If a parent earns an extra £100 in the run-up to Christmas to try to pay for some presents and give their family a decent holiday, they will see their next universal credit payment cut by £63. That is not a work incentive.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The hon. Lady is speaking very well, and I am glad that she is raising these issues. Is she aware that for some families who now fall victim to the family cap on universal credit it does not pay to go out to work, because work will pay them less than the nursery fees required if they have a third child?

Ruth George: Absolutely. Childcare is a key issue when families are trying to raise themselves out of poverty, as the hon. Lady rightly says. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has found that 30% of children are now in poverty, and nearly two thirds of those are in working households. Some 8 million adults live in poverty in a household where someone is in work.

Universal credit was meant to address the problems of poverty and work incentives. It does not. The Government are refusing to publish the evidence needed to fix their own policy, which they claim is what they want to do. If they really want to fix universal credit before it is rolled out to another 6 million families, they need to publish not just these reports but a full impact assessment, laying their policy and themselves open to scrutiny that this House and the public deserve.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Further interventions will eat significantly into the time available for the winding-up speeches. I simply make that point and leave colleagues to their own devices.

6.23 pm

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George), who brings such a wealth of knowledge to this important subject. I welcome the fact that this is the sixth debate on universal credit in this Parliament, which shows the importance that we attach to the matter. The Opposition side and on the Government side, given the contributions we have been making.

I also welcome the Secretary of State’s decision to release the project assessment review reports. I think that transparency and openness is incredibly important, but we do have to be a little cautious on this, because we also need to foster within Departments, especially if they are doing innovative projects, a culture of honesty, open exchange and frank and honest discussion. We must always have that balance, but I welcome the fact that the Work and Pensions Committee will receive the reports.

The purpose of scrutiny should be, at least partly, to drive reform. We need reform in all parts of Government and in what Government do, especially when we introduce new policies and ideas that try to change people’s lives radically. However, we must be cautious about how we use the data, some of which goes back to 2012. I am not sure how valuable or important data that goes back that far will be.

I do not accuse any Opposition Member of scaremongering, but there have been instances of scaremongering recently. Only last week, the BBC had to apologise because what they said made people fear what would happen over Christmas. The BBC apologised for that scaremongering, so we must bear that in mind when we consider data and its use.

We should acknowledge the reforms that the Government have delivered. I believe that they are a listening Government, especially the Department for Work and Pensions, and they have delivered numerous reforms in recent months.

The focus on the fix as opposed to the pause is incredibly important. The waiting days, the telephone costs and the six-week wait have been cut. The advances will become more accessible—that is important in the run-up to Christmas—and there will be payback over 12 months. People will be able to get an advance within one week and, in instances of the most pressing need, on the same day. There are also improved options of direct payment to landlords. A key change, which I really appreciate and I think many people will appreciate in the roll-out of universal credit in the coming year, is the two-week housing benefit payment, which does not have to be paid back. That is an important contribution, which means that when people go on to universal credit, that support is there from the beginning.

Further improvements are needed, especially for those who are self-employed. We need to look at the taper rates for work allowance and to increase the discretion of jobcentre staff in dealing with the most difficult cases. We should trust those who work in jobcentres when they deal with such cases.

I am pleased that the focus of the debate has been on the “fix” element and that the success of the Secretary of State and his team in delivering reform has been recognised. We need more reform, but I believe that universal credit is a mechanism to make work pay and lift people out of poverty. It is much better than Labour’s scheme, which created so much welfare dependency and a malign poverty trap.

6.27 pm

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow that speech, which at least had the merit of sounding less like a combative deaf cat than some Conservative Members’ speeches.

The debate has been depressing, partly because of the heart-rending stories that some colleagues have told. In Barrow and Furness, too, there has been increasing poverty and desperation in recent years. Our referrals to food banks are up by around two thirds on this time last year. People are trying to do their best, but they are struggling and they are frightened. I shall say more about scaremongering shortly.

The debate has also been depressing because some of the speeches made by Government Members bear little resemblance to their constituents’ reality. I do not think that that is because most of them are intrinsically bad people, but something happens when
we get into this Chamber, and people feel an obligation to parrot the lines they are given by their Whip or Department.

I was a special adviser in the last Labour Government in the Department for Work and Pensions and we considered universal credit—it was our long-term goal, too. There were good reasons for choosing not to go ahead with it at the time, and they are writ large in what is happening now. It is not that universal credit is a bad thing. In principle, we think it is a good thing, but to call the changes transformative—I mean, come on, look at it! The system does not even come close to the level of investment needed, both in terms of the payments made to families and of the support offered to get people back to work, to call it transformative.

Stephen Lloyd: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

John Woodcock: I will not, I am afraid, because we are so short of time.

The previous Labour Government were guilty of this rhetoric to an extent. I gently remind some Conservative Members, who may not have been here then, that we pursued a path of welfare reform. It was seen as dangerous at the time, although in fact it should have gone further and faster. There was a significant period when the shadow Work and Pensions Secretary, who is now the Chancellor of the Exchequer, said that we should not have made some of those changes. We were sometimes guilty of claiming that the reforms would transform people’s lives, but enough changes were never made to be able to make that so.

On the way in which the reforms are being implemented, “scaremongering” is a term that is bandied around a lot, but if Members want, with justification, to accuse people of scaremongering, they have to be confident about what the future will be for this benefit. The case studies my right hon. and hon. Friends have outlined today show the huge problems with the roll-out of universal credit. The recent history of benefit delivery by the Department for Work and Pensions and the people it has contracted makes it impossible to get to a place where we could think that this is all going to be fine, no matter the good intentions behind the changes, which are welcome in so far as they correct some of the glaring injustices of the system as it stood.

For the people of Barrow and Furness, the full transition to universal credit has been delayed until 18 July. There has, rightly, been much passionate talk about the dangers of a transition over the Christmas period. I fear for my constituents. I signed the Bill on holiday hunger introduced by my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field). I fear for families who struggle to feed their children over the holidays in the best of times. We need much less complacency from the Government and a sense that they are prepared to grip this problem. The problems are clearly already stacking up. That will continue and they need to be dealt with by the time my constituents go on fully to universal credit.

6.32 pm

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for calling me to speak in this very important debate today about universal credit.

Universal credit has been debated extensively over recent weeks and still the Opposition’s dialogue on universal credit is concerning. I am unsure about their real objective. The Opposition say they support the idea of universal credit, but their dialogue says something different and continues to cause distress among potential claimants and those waiting to switch over to universal credit.

Universal credit is a good thing. This system and its implementation is long overdue. It is a system within the welfare system to help to encourage people back to work. Universal credit is designed to replace the old outdated system, which has done very little to give people the help and the confidence they need to get back into work. It has for too long trapped them into working only 16 hours a week for fear of risking their benefits, or having to pay back large sums of money. This is about fairness and helping people when they need it most—people who have fallen into difficult situations and need to be supported with a system that is flexible enough for their specific circumstances to be taken into consideration. If the Opposition feel that the status quo is a preferred option, they really are sadly mistaken.

The new system takes six different benefits payments and makes them into one single payment. The roll-out from Government has, correctly, been slow and measured over a nine-year period. In my opinion, it is in my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead’s interest to note that the Government have, correctly, been slow and measured. That has allowed the Government to assess how the system is working. With any new system, however, there are always things that need to be modified and improved during implementation. Our debates over recent weeks have shown exactly that.

In my own area, universal credit roll-out has been put back until next May. The roll-out in my constituency will include the announcements in the Budget: the increase in advance payments of percentages up to 100% and available within five days of claims being made; claims able to be made online; the removal of the seven-day waiting period, meaning that entitlement starts on the first day; people already on housing benefit able to continue receiving it for two weeks after their universal credit claim; and the Government to make it easier for people to ask for the housing element to be paid directly to their landlord.

As of the summer, nearly 40% of universal credit claimants were in work. In my constituency, as of October, the claimant count of unemployed people was 2.1%—a total of 1,165 people. The Government are completely focused on helping people when they need it—helping people move forward with their lives—without losing sight of fairness. In 13 years of Labour Government, we saw people being trapped on benefits, and made better off on benefits. That is what we would have again under a Labour Government—policies that make it hard for people to achieve their aspirations and which do not give the people of this country the respect they deserve and need to move out of difficult times. I regard that as an insult.

Some 82% of the people claiming universal credit reported that they were satisfied or very satisfied with the service. I say again: do the Opposition not accept or realise that the old system is not working? Do they not understand that people want to move into work and stay there, and want the state to help them achieve that? I welcome the Secretary of State’s response and the willingness to share the details of the review with the Select Committee, but I am deeply concerned by this continual scaremongering by the Opposition. The suggestion that the Government, and in turn me, do not
care about people in need of help and are deliberately trying to harm them, and the suggestion that no one on benefits can manage their own lives, are quite frankly offensive.

When I was first elected in 2015, our constituents expressed a clear will: they wanted welfare reform. That is what the Government are delivering, along with their vision for developing our economy, providing better jobs, higher wages and a better quality of life, and securing a better future for Britain.

6.37 pm

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): I have never been in any doubt that my constituents understand the need to support each other through our welfare state. It is with quiet compassion, rather than resentment, that taxpayers see a portion of their labour dedicated to assisting those whom life has dealt an unfair or unforgiving hand. It was my two-year-old’s birthday party at the weekend. I listened with something akin to a tear in my eye to the moving comments of the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) about the child choosing between a present and food. It must surely be our common state of mind that we want a welfare system in which that is not a choice that any child has to face, and that is why it is so important we get welfare reform right.

The Government have designed universal credit precisely to deliver that ambition. Let us be clear: the welfare system we inherited—the legacy system—was profoundly socially and economically damaging, and in few places was it more so than in my constituency. The system trapped millions of people on out-of-work benefits for the entire course of Labour’s last decade in office and created what Fraser Nelson, editor of The Spectator, rightly called the most expensive poverty in the world. We can surely do better than that.

Year after year, it was not just money we squandered, it was human potential—human lives were being damaged by our getting this wrong. We perpetuated dependency on the state with scant concern for the dignity, confidence and independence of the most vulnerable in our society. I welcome the Secretary of State’s decision to publish the papers today, but we do not need supposedly secret papers to tell us that under Labour those trying to move into work stood to lose up to 90% of their earnings. Similarly, those already in work who wanted to increase their hours would have had to forfeit more than 80% of any increased earnings through a combination of withdrawn benefits and higher tax. Those were perverse incentives. The system did not help the recipients of welfare provision, it did not help people into work, and it left taxpayers feeling frustrated about the fact that their money was being used to perpetuate a problem rather than resolve it.

Universal credit stacks the incentives to ensure that work does pay. It is not perfect—we are not even halfway through the implementation phase—but we already see statistical data which show that claimants are 4% more likely to be in work within six months than their counterparts on jobseeker’s allowance. There are 3 million more people in work than there were in 2010; 600,000 fewer people are living in absolute poverty; and three quarters of the total number of children in workless families have been lifted out of poverty because their parents have been able to get full-time jobs. Those are achievements of which I am proud, and which I will defend.

Has the process of transition been perfect, and have the Government always got everything right first time? No, but that was in the nature of the system. What is important is how the Government respond. When there were cash-flow difficulties during the wait before the first payment, the Government abolished the initial seven-day waiting period, and they have now made available a full month’s payment in advance. When problems arose with rent arrears, the Government created the landlord portal and the trusted partner scheme, and committed themselves to a two-week continuation of housing benefit during the start of a universal credit claim. They have demonstrated repeatedly that they are receptive to feedback, and have acted decisively when necessary. We have seen the £1.5 billion additional investment package for roll-out, the delay in implementation from five years to nine, the adoption of Freephone helplines, the reduction in the taper rate, and the ability of families to claim back up to 85% of their childcare costs as they move into work—which is significantly more than they could claim under the previous system.

It is right, of course, that the Government are challenged, scrutinised and lobbied to make sensible reforms. I pay tribute to the work of Members on both sides of the House—particularly my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen), who was so eloquent, not only in her words but through her tears, as she spoke of how much it mattered for us to get this right. But when we hear talk of Dickensian Christmases and Tiny Tim, and suggestions that the Government’s sole purpose is to sadistically inflict suffering, I question whether those accusations are made in good faith, and whether they will yield the benefits that we all want to see.

We are as one, surely, in our compassion for our constituents. We want a welfare system that is fair not only to those in need, but to those who are striving to find work. I represent a constituency that was once trapped millions of people on out-of-work benefits for the entire course of Labour’s last decade in office and created what Fraser Nelson, editor of The Spectator, rightly called the most expensive poverty in the world. We can surely do better than that.

6.42 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): This has been an important debate. We have heard some excellent contributions, in which Members have raised the broad range of issues that remain to be addressed by the Government in relation to universal credit and the problems arising from its design and implementation. Those contributions have been, by turn, insightful, constructive, passionate, and at times emotional, particularly those of my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith), for North W est Durham (Laura Pidcock) and for High Peak (Ruth George).

Opposition Members welcome the statement that the Secretary of State has made about the project assessment reviews, but it is disappointing that this would never have happened if we had not tabled the motion. We look forward to the handing over of the reports to the Work and Pensions Committee, and we hope that there
will not be too many redactions, which would render them valueless. We also look forward to the consequent recommendations of the Committee—which may, of course, consider wider publication in the public interest, given the view of the Information Commissioner. The Secretary of State’s announcement does not get away from the fact that the Information Commissioner has asked for the reports to be put in the public domain, and I ask him to give serious thought to the commissioner’s instruction and make the reports public.

Between 2012 and 2015, five project assessment reviews of universal credit were carried out by the Government’s Major Projects Authority, which is now known as the Infrastructure and Projects Authority. In August this year, after a complaint from a campaigner, the Information Commissioner’s Office ruled that the reports must be disclosed. In a decision notice, the Information Commissioner said:

“The reports provide a much greater insight than any information already available about the UCP”—the universal credit programme—

“there are strong arguments for transparency and accountability for a programme which may affect 11 million UK citizens and process billions of pounds, which has had numerous reported failings in its governance.”

Why, then, have the Government failed to act? What have they to hide? Are they afraid that the reports will shine a light on what the commissioner refers to as the “numerous reported failings in its governance”, or is it that they do not want to provide us with an insight into how they came to develop the universal credit full service into the chaotic programme that it is proving to be?

It is important that we are given sight of these reports, because the competence of the Department for Work and Pensions really is a matter of public interest. It is important that we have that insight and that we understand what challenge there has been within the system to improve the programme. It is also important if we are to understand the kind of questions that have been raised in the Department about the Government’s flagship social security policy. Armed with that information, we can scrutinise whether they are the right kind of questions and, if they are not, we on these Benches are ready to help.

The debate today has been revealing. I feel that the Secretary of State has displayed a degree of complacency in relation to some of the remaining serious problems being generated by the Government’s design and implementation of universal credit. It would therefore be useful to know which issues have been raised in the reports. Have questions been asked about the impact on single-parent families, for example? Gingerbread has entitled its report on the impact of universal credit on lone parents “An impossible bind”, which indeed it is for many single parents. The report, which was published last month, highlights the practical problems facing single parents when they try to find work or increase their hours.

The shortage of part-time work and flexible jobs is a real issue, as is the very high cost of childcare, yet under universal credit the Government have increased new conditionality requirements. For the first time, parents of three and four-year-olds will be required to look for work or risk being sanctioned. By the time universal credit is rolled out, nearly 2 million single-parent families will be eligible to receive it. According to Gingerbread, 220,000 parents, including 165,000 single parents, will be affected by the new rules concerning three and four-year-olds.

Then there is the high cost of childcare, especially in London and the south-east. Any lone parent who has been watching “Motherland” will have laughed at the deep irony of the prospective childminder who, on being asked why she is charging as much as £18 an hour, replies, “Because I have to pay someone to look after my own children while I’m looking after yours.” But of course this failure of Government policy is no laughing matter, and it is important that universal credit supports the practical realities facing lone parents. Perhaps the reports can cast some light on that.

Then there is the two child policy. From April this year, under universal credit, third and subsequent children within a family will not receive the same social security support as their older siblings. This policy really is offensive in its implication that some children are valued more than others. It would indeed be useful to understand how on earth the Government came up with a policy that implies that. Children are our future, and we need the Government to invest in them for their sakes and for all our sakes.

There is mounting concern around the country at the growing and shameful problem of poverty, particularly child poverty, under this Government. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s report published yesterday, “UK Poverty 2017”, makes for sobering reading. It highlights the fact that more than 14 million people live in poverty in the UK. That is one in five people, or 20% of the population. It includes 8 million working-age adults, 4 million children and 1.9 million pensioners, and we know that 8 million people in poverty live in families where at least one person is in work.

That brings me to the cuts that have been made to universal credit. The cuts to work allowances, and so to work incentives, under universal credit were implemented in 2016, and they have undermined one of the core aims of the universal credit programme—namely, that work should always pay. We on these Benches know that people want to be able to work. Research carried out by Labour shows that, following cuts to work allowances and subsequent changes to the taper rate, some families will be £2,100 a year worse off. So, while we welcome the changes introduced in the Budget this autumn, the Government have to recognise that many of the core issues with universal credit remain, and that the size of the cuts is key. Having sight of the progress assessment reports is important, not least because it is reasonable for members of the public who are at the sharp end of the cuts to know just what has been going on in the Department, and how much money has been wasted.

It is also important to consider the impact of universal credit on the self-employed. The Government certainly need to address that issue, particularly at a time when there is real economic uncertainty in the light of the Government’s failure on productivity. Universal credit assumes that people earn the equivalent of 35 times the national living wage per week after the first year, but of course that is often not the case for new businesses, particularly seasonal businesses such as those related to tourism, fishing and agriculture. The National Farmers Union has suggested that the Government could give
people longer to get to that level of income. Of course, farmers’ income is always going to fluctuate. Someone on universal credit might average that amount over the course of a year, but there is no means for someone to be paid retrospectively beyond the one month cycle.

Moreover, universal credit will put further administrative burdens on business, since the reporting period is not in sync with that of HMRC. Labour would change the way in which self-employed workers are assessed to annually, rather than monthly, to account for their volatile working patterns. And of course the requirements that claims be made and managed online brings all sorts of problems; a farmer with poor broadband access, for example, might particularly struggle with the reporting requirements.

We have heard a great deal of testimony as to the effect of universal credit on people’s ability to pay their rents. While we acknowledge that the Government have made some movement on this, it remains to be seen how this will work given the delays in the system earlier this year. For example, some people in Croydon have had to wait up to 12 weeks for payments.

We welcome that the Government have changed tack, but I am sure that all of us want to see the publication of these papers. The Government have not moved nearly far enough. The issues with universal credit are causing serious problems for our constituents and need to be addressed. For these reasons it would be helpful if the Government could publish the project assessment reports, as directed by the Information Commissioner, so this House can carry out the scrutiny that this flawed programme desperately needs.

6.50 pm

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): Universal credit is being introduced at a time when record numbers of people are in work and unemployment is at its lowest for 40 years. It is a vital reform, replacing the outdated and complex benefits system of the past, which too often stifled people’s potential, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) outlined. Six benefits are replaced with one simple monthly universal credit payment, designed to support people whether they are in or out of work.

Under UC, claimants are better off when they move into work and they are better off when they progress in work. People’s UC is gradually reduced as earnings increase, so claimants will not lose all their benefits at once if they are on a low income. My hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) reminded us of features of the previous system that called out for reform. With UC, there is no 16-hour ceiling, no 16-hour floor, no such thing as “permitted work”—or, rather, non-permitted work—and there is no upheaval and risk in terms of people’s benefit as they move into a job, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) mentioned. This means that the more people work, the more money they get in their pocket. So UC supports those who can work and cares for those who cannot, while being fair to the taxpayer as the Government continue to spend around £90 billion a year supporting people of working age.

My hon. Friends the Members for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) and for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), who spoke about Wick, and others spoke of the dedication of Jobcentre Plus staff and of staff at housing associations and elsewhere, and the great deal of preparation going into readying for universal credit, and I echo those words of appreciation. I also say to any Members who have not recently visited their local jobcentre: please do so.

My hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) spoke of the phased roll-out approach and how that allows the Government to learn from frontline feedback and evolve the system, making the changes to improve as we go along, and making sure that people who need help can get it.

The Budget package that the Chancellor set out will put more money into claimants’ hands earlier, ensuring extra support for those who most need it. This is a £1.5 billion package and it addresses concerns that have been expressed about the delivery of the benefit, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) rightly said.

This month, new guidance will be issued to staff to ensure that claimants in the private rented sector who have their housing benefit paid directly to landlords are also offered that option when they join universal credit.

From January, we will make two changes to advances, and my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) reminded us of the new guidance given in jobcentres to make sure that advances are entirely known about. The changes are increasing the maximum recovery time from six months to a year and the maximum amount from 50% to 100%.

I should mention to the hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) that in practice this also means that new claimants in December can receive an advance of up to 50% of their overall entitlement, and may receive a second advance to take it up to 100% in the new year. So no one who needs immediate financial assistance will need to wait until the end of the first assessment period.

It has been said a few times that advances are a loan. An advance brings forward a payment, but it is not an advance like a normal loan, as there is no interest to be paid. It is also not like a normal wage advance in the sense that it does not just come out of people’s first payment. In addition, from February we will remove the seven-day waiting period, benefitting about 750,000 new universal credit claimants a year by an average of £160 per household. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) asked me to confirm that that is a net improvement in the cash position. Waiting days were a long-standing feature of the benefits system, so he is exactly right.

From April, as claimants with housing support transfer to universal credit, an additional two weeks of housing benefit will continue to be paid. That change will provide an average of £233 pounds in additional financial support per household for 2.3 million claimants over the roll-out. From February, the initial wait for payment will comprise an assessment period of one calendar month, during which evidence of earnings and so on will be gathered, and up to a further week of payment generation and administration via Bacs. A claimant’s first UC pay date will be up to seven calendar days after the end of their
initial assessment period, and subsequent pay due days will be on the same date each month. As my hon.
Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) said, most people are paid monthly, and that is the case for universal credit, too.

I want to try to respond to as many of the points made in the debate as I can, but I fear I will not get to all of them. The hon. Members for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd) and for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) talked about different payment patterns. It is a reality of devolution that they are possible under the devolved Administrations, and we will engage with them to make that work. However, we think that monthly is the better payment pattern. It is not that it is impossible to use other patterns, and an argument for why payment should be weekly could be constructed, but few things are paid fortnightly. Monthly is the more sensible pattern, and it is only way by which the assessment period can take account of all the different patterns of how people in work are paid.

My hon. and learned Friend the Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer) noted the use of Opposition days in respect of matters relating to the release of documents and discussed other urgent matters that have not been covered in the meantime. My hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) talked about the positive role that the Work and Pensions Committee can play in the process. My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) reminded us of the need for care and responsibility in interpreting reports. The hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) asked about the post-implementation review, and that will come in 2022. My hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) mentioned the importance of fiscal responsibility, and universal credit will save substantially on fraud and error.

Frank Field: Will the Minister give way?

Damian Hinds: I cannot. My hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stevens Kerr) asked about home visits, and I can confirm that the DWP makes around 300,000 home visits a year, most of which are completed within 10 days.

I want to turn specifically to the comments of the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), who made a passionate, powerful, emotive speech. Nobody could fail to have been affected by the moving stories that he related. I know that that is what brought him into politics, and I would never question his motivation, sincerity or determination. However, on the behalf of everybody on this side of the House—I can say this with no fear of contradiction—that is what brought us into politics, too. When we talk about extending free childcare, school results, the national living wage, the creation of 3 million jobs, the reduction in income inequality and record-high household incomes, they are not just statistics; they are steps towards tackling injustice and spreading opportunity, and universal credit is at the heart of that list.

Universal credit helps to prepare people for work through personalised support and help with IT skills and budgeting, by paying people monthly like most jobs and by paying money to people, not landlords. It helps people into work by removing the risk to their benefit claim by making it visibly clear that work will pay and by covering childcare costs in the run-up to work, so that children can settle and people can get set and ready for the first day at work. Once people are there, it helps them to get on in work, because it pays out based on earnings, not hours, because it covers more of their childcare costs, and because there are no hours rules and no restrictions on progression. We are in the middle of a fundamental structural reform that is already improving lives. We will continue to work with claimants, partners and right hon. and hon. Members from across the house to resolve issues and improve universal credit as it rolls out across the country.

Question put and agreed to. Resolved.

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, That she will be graciously pleased to give directions that the five project assessment reviews, carried out into universal credit between 2012 and 2015 by the Government’s Major Projects Authority now known as the Infrastructure and Projects Authority, and any subsequent project assessment reviews carried out into universal credit by the Infrastructure and Projects Authority between 1 January 2016 and 30 November 2017 that have been promised the papers, not redacted papers. That she will be graciously pleased to give directions that the five project assessment reviews, carried out into universal credit between 2012 and 2015 by the Government’s Major Projects Authority now known as the Infrastructure and Projects Authority, and any subsequent project assessment reviews carried out into universal credit by the Infrastructure and Projects Authority between 1 January 2016 and 30 November 2017 that have been provided to Her Majesty’s Ministers at the Department for Work and Pensions, be provided by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to the Work and Pensions Committee.

Frank Field: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I have never doubted the motives of people on the other side of the House. As the Government have accepted the motion, will the Select Committee have the papers tomorrow?

Mr Speaker: My understanding is that the Minister indicated the papers would be delivered before Christmas.

Frank Field: This Christmas, we hope.

Mr Speaker: Well, certainly this Christmas. I certainly was not thinking of 2018. There is probably a default presumption that it means this Christmas—[Interruption]—but it is always better to be explicit. I grant that to the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), who is chuntering from a sedentary position in evident dissatisfaction at the inadequate clarification thus far provided, but help may be at hand, because the Secretary of State is perched like a panther—if you can perch like a panther. He is poised like a panther, ready to pounce.

Mr Gauke: You have done my job for me, Mr Speaker. It is correct that, as I said in my opening remarks, we will provide this information before the House rises for Christmas 2017. On the question raised by the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), we will of course want to go through the documentation to take out, for example, the names of junior officials and any commercially sensitive information. As I say, we will provide that information before the House rises this Christmas.

Mr Speaker: I am inclined to leave it there for now. If the right hon. Member for Birkenhead has further points that he wishes to raise, he can, but I am not sure it will greatly profit him to do so now.

Frank Field: Mr Speaker, I will, if I may, come to talk to you about how soon we can get the documents. We have promised the papers, not redacted papers.
Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman is welcome to come to talk to me about that point, and I understand the premium he attaches to it. These are often matters of negotiation between a Committee and a Department, as recent experience has testified. There is merit—let me put it like this—in having clarity on the matter before the fact. My door is always open to him.

PETITIONS

Broadband: East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow

7.2 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I rise to present a petition relating to broadband in the constituency of East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow,

Declares that broadband strength in rural communities is far from adequate; further that the stark difference in access between urban centres and rural towns has created a distinct digital inequality; further that the lack of appropriate broadband strength in my constituency is a continuous stress on our local economy; further that my constituents are faced with an average download speed of 2.5MBps whilst cities can expect speeds in accession of 20MBps for the same price; and further that some constituents, therefore, are having to rely on satellite broadband which is expensive, unreliable and frankly archaic in 21st century Britain.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons occur in the UK each year; there are more than 1.2 million people living with the effects of stroke in the UK; and almost two thirds of stroke survivors leave hospital with some sort of disability.

On Thursday 26 October, I chaired a roundtable on stroke solutions and the revolutionary potential of mechanical thrombectomy for stroke patients. The facts about stroke are as follows: more than 100,000 strokes occur in the UK each year; there are more than 1.2 million stroke survivors in the UK; and almost two thirds of stroke survivors leave hospital with some sort of disability.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): I understand that this debate is very much about the UK and stroke units, but is my hon. Friend aware that today I met the Stroke Association, which is prepared to come to Southend to discuss changes in the stroke unit with the public? It will also have discussions with the wellbeing board, specifically to talk about the experience of reorganising acute and hyper-acute stroke units to give better outcomes, fewer deaths and fewer disabilities. This is good news for Southend, and the Stroke Association is happy to come to speak to us in Southend.

Sir David Amess: I very much welcome that news. I think that the two of us will look forward to meeting the Stroke Association and working with it to enhance the already excellent facilities at Southend Hospital.

The costs of stroke to the NHS and social care are about £1.7 billion a year, which is a huge amount. If I may be biased for a moment, let me say to the Minister that since 2013, the Government whom I support have contributed to significant advances in the treatment of stroke victims all over the country. The percentage of patients scanned within one hour of arrival in hospital has risen from 42% in 2013 to 51% last year, and the figure for those scanned within 12 hours has increased from 85% to 94%. I think the whole House will welcome that improvement, and I am grateful to Members on both sides of the House who are in the Chamber to listen to this Adjournment debate. I hope that their constituents will recognise the fact that they have stayed here.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I sought the hon. Gentleman's permission to intervene before this debate, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Right across the UK there are many problems in relation to stroke services. Some 4,000 people in Northern Ireland have had a stroke in the past year, and 36,000 people in Northern Ireland are living with the effects of
a stroke. What consideration has the hon. Gentleman given to people having a normal life after stroke through the provision of rehabilitation, and of occupational and cognitive therapies, and through the way in which the NHS handles aftercare, especially for the growing number of younger people who have strokes? This is not just about people in their 70s; it is sometimes about those in their 30s, 40s and 50s.

**Sir David Amess:** If I did not know better, I would have assumed that the hon. Gentleman had read my speech, because I was just about to say that in the past three years there has been a rise in compliance with standards for physiotherapy from 53% to 79%, and from 24% to 47% for speech and language therapy. I know that similar progress has been made in Scotland. With all that in mind, it is essential that the NHS continues to lead from the front. We must utilise some of the newest technologies to improve the effectiveness of stroke treatment, to allow patients to live fuller lives, and to decrease the burden of ill health after someone has suffered a stroke.

Two out of three stroke survivors currently leave hospital with a long-term disability at a cost of £1.7 billion, as I said. The provision of healthcare to people who have had a stroke accounts for approximately 3% to 5% of all healthcare expenditure, which is a vast amount. The cost of stroke treatment will rise to £43 billion in 2025 and £75 billion in 2035. If I remember rightly, I think the husband of the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) suffered strokes during his illness.

**Lady Hermon** (North Down) (Ind): It is very kind of the hon. Gentleman to mention my late husband. He did not actually suffer from a stroke; he suffered from Alzheimer’s, which was unfortunately the cause of his death. While I am on my feet, however, may I encourage the hon. Gentleman to put on record his appreciation for all the wonderful charities that work with stroke victims, and that support them and their families after what is a devastating health incident?

**Sir David Amess:** I absolutely join the hon. Lady in celebrating the work of all those charities.

The European Stroke Journal found that improving access to thrombolysis and early supported discharge services alone can contribute to reducing the financial burden of stroke on health and social care services. When the benefits of treatments such as mechanical thrombectomy are included, the costs can be lowered significantly. What measures are the Government taking to address the rising costs associated with strokes in England? I very much hope the Government are considering the widespread use of mechanical thrombectomy, which is a new and effective way of treating some of the most serious strokes caused by a blood clot.

**Maggie Throup** (Erewash) (Con): I have heard first-hand stories about the impact of mechanical thrombectomy and just how fantastic a treatment it is. It can enable people who might have had lifelong disabilities to lead normal lives. I gather it is being rolled out throughout the NHS through specialised commissioning, but does my hon. Friend agree that the roll-out needs to be speeded up, and that we need more people in place to carry out the treatment so that more individuals can benefit from it?

**Sir David Amess:** Even though money is tight, I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. I have seen a video of the operation, and it is just extraordinary that a catheter can be inserted into a patient’s artery to access the clot, which is then mechanically removed. The technology is extraordinary.

Mechanical thrombectomy significantly reduces disability rates after strokes. It removes clots that are too big to be broken down by drugs alone. For each six-minute delay in the delivery of mechanical thrombectomy, there is a 1% increase in the proportion of people who become disabled. Royal College of Physicians guidelines for stroke care label it as the best recommended practice. It is an effective procedure with very low complication rates. It is highly cost-effective, too. The Stroke Association has calculated that over a 10-year period, the net monetary benefit of 9,000 eligible patients receiving the treatment would be between £530 million and £975 million.

Mechanical thrombectomy enables more stroke survivors to live independently in their own homes, which is crucial, and then to return to work and take control of their lives again, thereby saving the NHS money. It really is a game-changing treatment that could revolutionise stroke victims’ experiences, yet despite NHS England’s agreeing to fund it, it is delivered for only 0.008% of the 85,122 acute stroke admissions, versus the EU benchmark of 3%, so we are really some way behind.

Let me blow the trumpet for Southend, following on from what my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Dukdudridge) said earlier. Southend has been developing an interventional neuroradiology service alongside a hyper-acute stroke service providing thrombectomy. Our service is led and delivered by an interventional neuroradiologist. It has been developed with the local trust board since 2013, but due to a current recommendation that only interventional neuroradiologists can perform the procedure, she is the only person who can perform thrombectomy at the moment, so the service is provided on a “best endeavours” basis and is not, unfortunately, a regular service. The service is currently available only at Southend and nowhere else in Essex. We need to expand it to provide a 24-hour service. The only other place where it is provided is at St George’s Hospital in London.

Mr Paul Gulyer, who is a lead consultant in stroke medicine at Southend University Hospital, tells me that less than 1% of ischaemic stroke patients receive endovascular treatment and that, despite around 9,000 patients being eligible for mechanical thrombectomy, only 400 patients received the treatment last year. He has argued that the barriers to this treatment revolve around skills and education, resources and attitudes.

This is not a criticism of my hon. Friend the Minister, because he cannot wave a magic wand and solve all these problems, but Mr Gulyer has advised me that there are not enough trained specialists to be able to provide a 24/7 service in all areas. Unfortunately, we also have a postcode lottery, with not enough neuroradiologists and only 80 interventional neuroradiology operators in the United Kingdom.

**Maggie Throup:** My hon. Friend is being very generous with his time. He has hit the nail on the head: the treatment is very specialist and is carried out by surgeons and neurologists who are not normally there to treat stroke victims. The change in the way in which stroke
neurologists so that we can continue to save lives.

Sir David Amess: My hon. Friend is spot on in her analysis. I know that the Minister will take the points that she has made to heart and consider how we can improve the present situation.

Consensus forecasts predict that 150 trained people are required to run a fully functioning 24/7 national service. Mr Guyler says that training in stroke intervention is not readily available, that not enough hospitals can afford 24/7 availability and that there are not enough expert neuroradiologists to interpret CT scans. He says that there are turf wars between neurologists, cardiologists, neurosurgeons, radiologists, vascular surgeons and neuro-radiologists on who can and will perform interventional stroke treatment in the future. I do not think it is for politicians to get involved in those turf wars. The medical staff need to sort out between themselves who will lead in these matters. Apparently, there are also turf wars between university and district general hospitals on who should perform the procedure.

Mr Guyler also highlighted the fact that we have the expertise to develop this treatment significantly. The UK has one of only five training simulators in Europe—we should be proud of that—which is based at Anglia Ruskin University.

What are the Government doing to encourage more areas to reconfigure acute stroke services? We do need a new national stroke plan. I was at the launch of the original plan at St James’s Palace many years ago, but it is now time for a new one.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech on stroke services, which are invaluable right across the United Kingdom. I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is important that people who suffer strokes also have access to psychological services? Many people experience depression when adjusting post stroke, and it is important that counselling is available to support them through that.

Sir David Amess: The hon. Lady, with her considerable expertise in this area, is right to bring that particular matter to the attention of the House. We certainly need more provision of the women and men who give that sort of support.

A significant part of a new national stroke plan should be the development of 24/7 access to mechanical thrombectomy for all United Kingdom citizens, no matter where they live. Southend has already shown itself to be both safe and effective. It exceeds the recommended audit standards, its improvement in patient outcome is similar to international trials and, despite a severely ill patient collective, its results exceed the British Association of Stroke Physicians’ quality benchmarks. I want all my constituents to have 24/7 access to the best possible stroke treatment, so I urge the Government to find a way of effectively introducing mechanical thrombectomy to all parts of the United Kingdom.

What is the Government’s assessment of the national stroke strategy, and will the Minister update the House on progress with its replacement?

I am not criticising the Government’s provision in any sense but, as with all these things, we could and should do more. We could do better. It is frustrating that a wonderful technique is available but is not available to everyone. Perhaps we can find a few more resources now because that should result in a saving in the long run. Finally, does the Minister agree that this wonderful facility at Southend Hospital is a further good reason for Southend to be declared a city?

7.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine): What a pleasure it is to see you, Madam Deputy Speaker; it has been a while. I knew that my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) would get in a mention of Southend becoming a city. I was only disappointed that it did not happen earlier in his speech, but he managed it in the very last line. I will show great diplomacy and leave that matter to the Ministers responsible. I congratulate him on securing another Adjournment debate—we have done this before—which is on stroke services this time. As ever, he set out his case brilliantly and with such passion.

He gives newer parliamentarians a real lesson in how to handle debates in this House.

As my hon. Friend said and as so many of us know, stroke is a devastating disease for patients and their families. He is right that there are currently 1.2 million stroke survivors in the UK, with more than 1,350 in my hon. Friend’s constituency alone. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is in his place as always at these debates, is absolutely right that stroke is predominantly a condition that affects older people. But it does affect younger people. I have met people of my age and younger who have been affected by stroke. Obviously, it is clinically debilitating, but it also comes as a great shock to their friends and families, who are taken aback by this happening to young people.

So many NHS staff work in multidisciplinary teams on stroke, and I pay tribute to them. There are nurses, consultants and speech and language therapists—the speechies, one of whom I am married to, so I will get brownie points for this—as well as physios, occupational therapists and specialist nurses, who all do so much when somebody suffers a stroke. The Stroke Association, which has already been mentioned, is an absolutely first-rate charity and a real partner for the Government.

I also commend my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West for his strong work in driving improvements to stroke services both nationally and within his constituency. I know that he has taken a long interest in health matters, including stroke, as an MP. I reiterate his comments about the high-quality service provided by Southend stroke unit—more on that in a moment.

My hon. Friend will no doubt agree—he said this of course—that, in general, stroke services across the country are performing really well. Let me just reiterate some of the figures. Thirty-day mortality has dropped from 30% in 1998 to just over 13% in 2015-16—a huge improvement. The percentage of patients scanned within one hour of arriving at hospital, which is so critical, has increased from 42% in 2013-14 to over 51% in just three years, and the percentage scanned within 12 hours has increased from 85% to 94% in the same period.
There are many public health campaigns that we remember throughout the years, but the Act FAST campaign that public health campaigners and the Stroke Association have done is something we see and do not forget, and that, of course, was the intention.

Excellent progress has been made in the treatment of stroke over recent years. It is important that this programme continues and that the gains are built on, especially given the demographic changes we know are coming down the track with our much talked off and much publicised obesity challenge and our ageing population. That is why we published the cardiovascular disease outcomes strategy in 2013.

There is ongoing work in virtually all parts of the country to organise acute stroke care to ensure that all stroke patients have access to high-quality specialist care, regardless of where they live or what time of day or week they have their event. Although the national stroke strategy comes to an end shortly, as my hon. Friend said, NHS England continues to lead an effective programme of work on prevention and treatment. We are continuing to work closely together to improve acute treatment through the centralisation of care in centres that can provide the highest level of care and treatment at all times of the day and night.

Decisions on whether the strategy should be renewed are, of course, a matter for NHS England, but in liaison with Ministers. My understanding is that NHS England does not have current plans to renew it in the same form, but it is a subject that I, as the relatively new Minister, encouraged, of course, by my hon. Friend’s debate, plan to discuss with NHS England early in the new year. I would welcome my hon. Friend’s involvement—and that of other Members—if he wishes to feed into that.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive response. One thing that is sometimes overlooked is research and development—the work that is done by universities in conjunction with health groups to try to find better ways of caring for people with strokes. Does he have any information on how critical that is to the whole care package that is given to those who have had strokes?

Steve Brine: I echo the hon. Gentleman’s sentiment that that work is critical. I mentioned the Act FAST campaign, which was a heavily evidenced public health campaign showing that the quicker we act after the event, the better the outcome, so he is absolutely right to highlight that issue. However, I am conscious of time, so I am going to press on.

My hon. Friend rightly spoke about mechanical thrombectomy, which he called a game-changer, and he is absolutely right. To continue and build on our stroke service success and to address the costs associated with stroke in England, which was one of my hon. Friend’s observations, it is imperative that we keep identifying and developing innovative treatments and cutting-edge procedures.

In mechanical thrombectomy, or MT as we shall know it, we have an innovation that we believe can significantly improve patient outcomes, and my hon. Friend spoke about that. In April this year, NHS England announced that it will commission mechanical thrombectomy so that it can become more widely available for patients who have certain types of acute ischaemic stroke, which is a severe form of the condition. My understanding is that work by NHS England is now under way to assess the readiness of 24 neuroscience centres across the country. It is expected that the treatment will start to be phased in later this year and early next year, with an estimated 1,000 patients set to benefit across the first year of introduction. Overall, this will benefit an estimated 8,000 stroke patients a year and save millions of pounds in long-term health and social care costs—my hon. Friend was absolutely right to point out the rising costs to NHS England around this condition.

As the clinical director for stroke at NHS England has said, we are committed to fast-tracking new and effective treatments that will deliver long-term benefits for patients. For me, this treatment is just one example of many that we believe have the potential to tangibly improve patient care and to address rising costs.

Maggie Throup: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Steve Brine: I am going to press on, because we have to finish at a certain time, but I thank my hon. Friend for her contribution earlier.

Stroke services are an important part of the range of vital services delivered in the part of Essex represented by my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West. It is important that his constituents have the right access to the right care at the right time, which in this case means specialist acute and hyper-acute stroke units. As he knows, and as we have discussed in Adjournment debates previously, there is a lively debate in his local area about the best way to configure services in order to meet these needs. As ever, he makes a powerful case for Southend, which he says has shown itself to be both safe and effective, and I have no reason to doubt his word.

My hon. Friend’s second big question was about what we are doing to transform services. Sustainability and transformation partnerships are absolutely key in this regard. STPs cannot but help in improving stroke services; they have a huge part to play. STPs should bring the local population, NHS organisations and local authority bodies together to propose how they, at a locally designed level, can improve the way that their local health and care is planned and delivered. These local areas have been encouraged to take a collective view of the local health system so that they can explore how best services within the local area, including stroke services, can be streamlined and centred around the patient, and determine what configurations are necessary within each local area to deliver the best possible care.

My hon. Friend’s description of turf wars does not surprise me, although it does disappoint me. If he wishes to raise anything specific with me, I ask him to write to me about it. As the Minister responsible for STPs, I do not want to see this happening, and if I can help with it, I will certainly do so.

Much guidance has been issued to the system from us at the centre to help support STPs in making these crucial local reconfiguration decisions. My hon. Friend’s associated STP, Mid and South Essex, is making good progress and has recently been rated through our STP dashboard as being in the top half, so it is a top-half-of-the-table team among STPs. Mid and South Essex’s stroke services compare very well with the best, in many ways, but, as he says, we could be doing much better.
One area that it has identified for improvement is that none of the three existing hospitals currently has the right number of specialists to provide the level of specialist stroke unit care that is being proposed. That goes to the heart of some of the examples that he gave from the consultant he has been speaking to.

I welcome the fact that organisations within my hon. Friend’s area, and other STP areas across England, are working in partnership to develop proposals that can really benefit those who matter most—the patients. There are proposals currently out for consultation in his area, which obviously my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) takes a very close interest in as well. I look forward to seeing the results of that consultation in due course. Knowing my hon. Friends, I feel almost certain that we will be back here discussing that at some point.

I mentioned the tangible progress that has been made in improving both the quality and delivery of stroke services, with evidence-based public health campaigns and really strong, well-organised local services, but there is so much more to do. Patient mortality has indeed fallen, compliance with the standards has risen, and patient experience and satisfaction continues to improve. This is a pathway on which I expect us to continue. New services that my hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise, such as mechanical thrombectomy, can really help us in achieving this. He said what a fascinating piece of medical technology that is. Putting the mesh into the groin for it then to travel through to have such an impact is truly incredible. We are very clever, in many ways.

How this is being delivered is changing, and that is important. The STPs are providing a new way of working. They can be controversial because they involve difficult decisions around reconfiguration, but they should involve local organisations, local services, local people, and local MPs. Local MPs who are not involved in their STPs should ask themselves why not. STPs, and the whole reconfiguration process, are a huge opportunity for us. Locally led commissioning enables local need to be taken into account in decision making about the shape of all services. It can result in very strong local services that can meet these needs, and nowhere is that more important than in stroke care. It is a system that drives improvement in all patient care, and that is what we are about. I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this debate to the House, and other hon. Members who have contributed.

Question put and agreed to.

7.34 pm

House adjourned.
The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): May I start by paying tribute to Jimmy Hood, who died earlier this week? Jimmy was formerly my neighbouring MP and a constituent, and although I have to say that we did not agree on very much, we always got on very well. I remain grateful to Jimmy for his help and support when I was first elected to this House. Jimmy would have been proud to see himself as a traditional Labour man through and through, a fighter for mining communities and mining interests and, obviously, a parliamentarian of 28 years’ standing who held many important roles in this Parliament. Our thoughts are with Marion and his family at this time.

I have regular discussions with Cabinet colleagues, the UK Minister for Digital and the Scottish Government regarding the roll-out of superfast broadband. Just last week, the Minister for Digital met the Scottish Government’s Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy and Connectivity to discuss broadband roll-out and the delays that we have seen from the Scottish Government.

Tony Lloyd: May I join the Scottish Secretary in paying tribute to Jimmy Hood? Jimmy was a friend of mine, and a friend of many of us here. He would have appreciated my saying that he was a bear of a man, and our Parliament was better for him and his kind.

On broadband roll-out, the Prime Minister recently told the House that the Government intend to work through Scottish local authorities. Will the Secretary of State agree that the borderlands initiative is a real opportunity to ensure that digital connectivity in that area is greatly improved, which will enhance the economy of the borderlands area?

David Mundell: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. Connectivity is at the heart of the proposal that the five cross-border local authorities have brought forward in the borderlands package. My hon. Friend will be aware that the original intention for the roll-out of broadband in Scotland was to focus on the south of Scotland but, in their centralising way, the SNP Scottish Government put a stop to that.

Superfast broadband is very important for those who want to access banking. There are now more cash machines in this House than there are on Cambuslang Main Street in my constituency. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with the Royal Bank of Scotland about its programme of branch closures?

David Mundell: I very much accept the point that the hon. Gentleman makes. It is not good enough for RBS to say that people can rely on internet and mobile banking when so many people in Scotland do not have access to the internet or effective mobile services. When I meet the Royal Bank tomorrow, I will convey the concerns—I think from across the House—about its programme of closures.

1. [902724] Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): In an area that is entirely reserved, the UK Government allocation of £21 million to Scotland’s R100 programme—the Reaching 100% programme—is less than the amount that Devon and Somerset received. Is the Secretary of State not ashamed that, on his watch, he has allowed Scotland to be so chronically underfunded?

David Mundell: This is not even about funding; it is about spending the money and taking action to roll out broadband. Three years ago—I repeat, three years ago—there was an allocation of funding, and no action has been taken to procure the roll-out.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Does the Secretary of State not think the Scottish Conservatives should just stop embarrassing themselves on the issue of broadband? Thanks to the added value of the Scottish Government’s investment, we have the fastest broadband roll-out in the whole of the UK. Without that investment, only 41% of premises in my constituency would have access to fibre broadband; instead, 82% have. In the Secretary of State’s constituency,
the figure is 80% instead of 39%. Perhaps the Scottish Conservatives should avail themselves of Scottish broadband and google how not to embarrass themselves in this House?

David Mundell: If anyone has embarrassed himself, it is the Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy and Connectivity, who sent out 35 tweets to tell people what a good job he was doing. The First Minister of Scotland sent my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) a seven-tweet thread to tell her what a good job she was doing. People up and down Scotland who do not receive adequate broadband services know who is to blame: the Scottish Government.

Revenue Budget

2. Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the effect of the autumn Budget 2017 on the level of Scotland’s revenue budget.

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): The recent Budget shows that we are delivering for Scotland, including £347 million in additional resource budget as part of £2 billion extra as a result of Barnett consequentials.

Alan Brown: Under the Secretary of State for Scotland’s watch, Scotland’s revenue budget has been cut by £2.6 billion, including a £200 million cut next year alone. Under this Secretary of State for Scotland, more than £200 million of common agricultural policy convergence funding has been stolen. He also voted against the VAT exemption for police and fire services. Why has the Secretary of State done nothing to prevent those Tory measures?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman suggests that we have done nothing, but the day before the Budget, that £347 million of additional resource budget was not there. That was announced in the Budget statement, along with another £1.7 billion of additional capital to support the businesses and people of Scotland.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): I am sure that Members on both sides of the House appreciate the role that oil and gas play not just in the north-east economy, but in the UK economy. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the transferable tax history that was set out in the Budget is a desperately needed shot in the arm for the industry, and a step in the right direction to making Aberdeen a global hub for decommissioning? That shows that 13 Scottish Tory MPs get things done.

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is entirely right. I know that the oil and gas sector has warmly welcomed the changes that we are making to provide additional tax relief through transferable tax history. Many in the sector believe that that measure will lead to tens of billions of additional investment during the lifetime of the North sea reserves.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I associate myself with the Secretary of State’s kind remarks about the late Jimmy Hood, who was a fine champion of Labour values and of his community. The whole House offers condolences to his family and all those who knew him.

The Government claim that Scotland has received an additional £2 billion in the Budget, yet the Fraser of Allander Institute says that the revenue budget will be about £500 million less in real terms within the next two years. Who are the people of Scotland to believe: this redundant Secretary of State, or a world-renowned economic think-tank? Will the Financial Secretary address that question directly?

Mel Stride: The figures speak for themselves. As the hon. Gentleman should know—I am sure that he does—by 2020 the block grant to Scotland will be £31.1 billion before devolutionary adjustments, and that is a simple real-terms increase.

Joint Ministerial Committee

4. Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): What progress the Joint Ministerial Committee (EU Negotiations) is making.

Kevin Foster: I welcome the constructive approach that is being taken to the Joint Ministerial Committee. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is vital that both sides keep this up and make real progress on the substance, so that as we leave the EU we have a stronger Scottish Parliament as part of a stronger United Kingdom?

David Mundell: I agree with my hon. Friend. I look forward to the opportunity to continue the good progress that we are making in our framework discussions, which will lead to significantly more powers for Holyrood while maintaining the integrity of the UK’s internal market.

David Duguid: As my right hon. Friend will know, fishing is a totemic industry in my constituency of Banff and Buchan, where there is real concern that the Scottish Government want to take Scotland back into the common fisheries policy. Can he reassure me that in all conversations and negotiations in the JMC (EN), he stands firm on taking Scotland’s fishermen out of the CFP, and keeping them out?

David Mundell: In his short time in this Parliament, my hon. Friend has already come to be seen as a champion for the fishing industry. I can give him an absolute guarantee: unlike the Scottish National party, which would take us straight back into the common fisheries policy, this Government will take Scotland and the rest of the UK out of that discredited policy.
Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): The Secretary of State rightly argued in September 2014 that if Scotland left the United Kingdom, there would be a barrier at Berwick because of Scotland leaving the UK single market. Can he tell the House why it is any different for the island of Ireland? Is not his Brexit shambles a threat to the United Kingdom?

David Mundell: I have been, and remain, absolutely clear that nothing will be done in any Brexit deal that will threaten the integrity of the United Kingdom, and particularly Scotland’s part in it.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Given the miasma of despair that hangs over this dying Government, Scotland needs a competent and cogent voice at the Cabinet table. To prove that that voice is his, will the Secretary of State tell us his red lines, in Scotland’s interests, that he has laid out to the Prime Minister?

David Mundell: I am quite clear that my red line is the integrity of the United Kingdom, and keeping Scotland in the United Kingdom, which people in Scotland voted for in 2014. We are leaving the EU as a United Kingdom, and nothing that the SNP does will stop that.

Industrial Strategy

5. Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): What steps the Government plan to take to ensure that Scotland benefits from the new industrial strategy. [902719]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): The industrial strategy is a comprehensive plan for boosting productivity to raise the earning power of people and businesses. We have been working constructively with the Scottish Government, who hold many of the policy levers that will help to make the industrial strategy a success in Scotland. We have proposed a review of inter-agency collaboration to maximise the coherence and impact of both Governments’ work in Scotland.

Mims Davies: This UK-wide industrial strategy is extremely welcome in my constituency. Southampton airport connects Eastleigh to Edinburgh and Glasgow by two busy routes across the UK. Does the Secretary of State agree that regional airports and vital connectivity will increase prosperity in Scotland and England?

David Mundell: I was delighted to hear that Edinburgh airport has had its busiest year ever, so I agree absolutely with my hon. Friend. Friend will know that, at the recent conference of the parties event in Germany, there were considerable efforts on the part of the whole United Kingdom—the Scottish Government working with the UK Government—to deliver just that.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): At the last Scottish questions, the Secretary of State said that he had shared analysis with the Scottish Government. This morning we discovered that there is no impact assessment, so what analysis was shared with the Scottish Government?

David Mundell: First, the material that has been provided to the Exiting the European Union Committee has also been provided to the devolved Administrations. The position was—and is—that officials from the UK and Scottish Governments are working together on the basis of analysis that they have both done.

Leaving the EU: Devolution

6. Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on devolving powers to Scotland after the UK leaves the EU. [902720]

9. Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on devolving powers to Scotland as a result of the UK’s withdrawal from the EU [902723]

13. Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on devolving powers to Scotland as a result of the UK’s withdrawal from the EU [902727]

14. David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on devolving powers to Scotland as a result of the UK’s withdrawal from the EU [902728]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): The UK Government are working with colleagues in the devolved Administrations to carefully consider our approach to powers returning from the EU. At the last
meeting of the JMC (EN) we agreed a set of principles and I am confident that we can take further steps at the next meeting to be held on 12 December.

**Martyn Day:** Does the Secretary of State agree with his Scottish Tory colleagues who described clause 11 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill as “not fit for purpose” and said that it “needs to be...replaced with a new version”—[Official Report, 4 December 2017; Vol. 631, c.731]?

If so, how does he propose to amend it?

**David Mundell:** I heard the eloquent speech that my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) made during Monday’s debate. Of course, the Government will respond to the issues that he raised.

**Peter Grant:** The Secretary of State will remember that when the Scotland Bill was on its way through Parliament, we submitted 60 amendments, every one of which he and the Government opposed, but most of which they then adopted through the back door of the House of Lords. Do the Secretary of State and the Government intend to use the same discredited, undemocratic process to correct the faults of clause 11?

**David Mundell:** If the hon. Gentleman has concerns about the procedures of the House of Commons and the House of Lords, he can raise them through the Procedure Committee. He acknowledges exactly what happened: we had a debate; the Government listened and responded; and the Scotland Bill was amended for the better.

**Deidre Brock:** The Federation of Small Businesses Scotland, the Institute of Directors Scotland, the Scottish chambers of commerce, Universities Scotland and many other Scottish organisations have called for a differentiated approach to immigration for Scotland. The problems that my constituents such as Françoise Milne face have crystallised the issue and the human cost. Will the Secretary of State table amendments to clause 11 to support the devolution of immigration and visa controls to Scotland?

**David Mundell:** I do not support the devolution of immigration to Scotland. Three years ago, the Smith commission deliberated on what powers and responsibilities would be held in the Scottish Parliament and what would be held here in Westminster. It was agreed by all parties that Westminster would retain immigration.

**David Linden:** During Monday’s debate on the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, Scottish Tory MPs said that clause 11 was “not fit for purpose”, but is not the reality that while we hear much talk from them, they are actually just Lobby fodder for the Government?

**David Mundell:** Conservative Members are happy to be judged by our actions. We heard all these things when the Scotland Bill was going through the House of Commons, yet at the end of the process, Lord Smith said that it met his committee’s requirements in full. In this House we will deliver an EU (Withdrawal) Bill that can generate the consent of the Scottish and Welsh Governments.

**Mr Bernard Jenkin** (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): May I commend to my right hon. Friend the most recent report of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, which was published last week, on inter-institutional relations in the UK? Will he accept that there is a strong consensus that devolution arrangements are not finished and we need far stronger institutional underpinning of the relations between the four parts of the UK, and that this is an opportunity to achieve that?

**David Mundell:** Of course I have seen my hon. Friend’s excellent report, and the Government are continuing to consider it. Obviously I believe that intergovernmental institutions and relations can be improved, and we must continue to work on that.

**Stephen Kerr** (Stirling) (Con): It is welcome news that good progress was made at the last meeting of the Joint Ministerial Committee, when principles underpinning common frameworks were agreed. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is vital for Scotland’s two Governments to work together as we leave the European Union, so that the common frameworks that we need to maintain the UK internal market are retained while all remaining powers are devolved?

**David Mundell:** I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, and that is our approach. I am happy to put on record that I welcome the Scottish Government’s constructive approach to these matters in recent weeks.

**Lesley Laird** (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Lab): Let me first thank the Secretary of State and other Members for their condolences, on behalf of Jimmy Hood’s family.

On Monday night, the Scottish Tories were herded through the Lobbies and told to trample all over the devolution settlement. Who issued those instructions, the Prime Minister or Ruth Davidson and the Secretary of State?

**David Mundell:** I know that the hon. Lady does not like it, but the Bill is going to be amended not at the behest of the Labour party’s incoherent approach or the Scottish National party’s nationalist approach, but because Scottish Conservatives have tabled practical amendments.

**Lesley Laird:** I welcome that clarification, but the question was really “Why could the Secretary of State not have presented those amendments the other night?” Throughout Monday’s debate his Scottish colleagues acknowledged that there were deficiencies in the Bill, but were unable to name one. Will the Secretary of State now do what they could not? Will he tell us first what deficiencies there are in the Bill, and secondly why they voted for the Bill to be passed unamended when they all knew that it was fundamentally flawed?

**David Mundell:** If the hon. Lady had been in the Chamber at the time, she would have heard the speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton). He set out very clearly why clause 11 needed to be amended, and what type of amendments would be tabled.
Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): May I associate myself with the Scottish National party with the Secretary of State’s comments about the late Jimmy Hood?

We are more than halfway through consideration in Committee of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill and, in particular, its effect on devolution. I think that the people of Scotland need clarity during this process. The Secretary of State knows that there is widespread concern throughout the House, and in his own party, about the measures in clause 11. He has indicated that there will be amendments, so may I ask him this? Will the Government table amendments to clause 11, yes or no?

David Mundell: Yes.

Mr Speaker: I hope that the hon. Gentleman’s second question is shorter.

Tommy Sheppard: May I ask the Secretary of State when that will happen?

David Mundell: The answer is that it will happen on Report. We have been very clear about this. The Committee stage is about listening and adapting to issues that have been raised; we have listened to my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire, and we will table amendments to clause 11.

Capital Project Funding

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman should know that there was a full consultation.

Tommy Sheppard: Does the Secretary of State agree that while the sum is much less than might have been hoped for, the Barnett consequentials for housing should be ring-fenced by the Scottish Government for that purpose alone, and not for another high-profile, faulty bridge?

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady is, I know, most vexed about the Queensferry crossing, and she is right to be so. It was widely trumpeted by the Scottish Government and the SNP as a great infrastructure success, yet I understand that it is currently partly closed, and is likely to be suffering from closures for many months to come, at great inconvenience to the hon. Lady’s constituents. [Interruption.] She should address her comments to the SNP and the Scottish Government. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: We are grateful to the Financial Secretary—or at least those of us who could hear him were. We now come to the question of the hon. Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies) who wants to ask about Scotch whisky, so I ask for a bit of order.

Scotch Whisky: Exports

8. Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): What discussions he has had with the Scottish Government since the autumn Budget 2017 on plans for capital project funding in Scotland.

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): Further to our discussions with the Scottish Government and the announcements made in the Budget, an additional £1.7 billion will be available to Scotland in capital resources. That is a 33% increase in real terms.

Christine Jardine: Does the Secretary of State agree that while the sum is much less than might have been hoped for, the Barnett consequentials for housing should be ring-fenced by the Scottish Government for that purpose alone, and not for another high-profile, faulty bridge?

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady is, I know, most vexed about the Queensferry crossing, and she is right to be so. It was widely trumpeted by the Scottish Government and the SNP as a great infrastructure success, yet I understand that it is currently partly closed, and is likely to be suffering from closures for many months to come, at great inconvenience to the hon. Lady’s constituents. [Interruption.] She should address her comments to the SNP and the Scottish Government. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: We are grateful to the Financial Secretary—or at least those of us who could hear him were. We now come to the question of the hon. Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies) who wants to ask about Scotch whisky, so I ask for a bit of order.

11. Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to increase exports of Scotch whisky.

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): I was delighted to host the ever-popular Scotch Whisky Association reception at Dover House last night. The UK Government work closely with the association, individual distilleries and companies across a range of issues from market promotion to market access.

Mark Menzies: The Chancellor’s Budget announcement that he would freeze duty on Scotch whisky is a sign of support for one of Scotland’s great industries. As one of the Prime Minister’s trade envoys, I have recently been in Colombia, Peru and Chile banging the drum for Scotch whisky; does my right hon. Friend agree that the Scotch whisky industry has an enormous opportunity to boost trade with growing markets as we look to build a truly global Britain?

David Mundell: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that there are huge opportunities for Scotch whisky as we leave the EU, particularly in South America, and I commend him for his activities. I also commend Diageo for the 20th anniversary of the creation of the company on 17 December.

Jobcentre Closures

15. Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of proposed jobcentre closures on local communities in Scotland.

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): We continue to provide excellent support to those seeking work, or who cannot work, through a network of offices which are modern, accessible and meet future requirements. Most jobcentres are staying put. We are merging some neighbourhood offices to create bigger, multi-skilled teams and moving to better buildings, all of which will lead to better customer service.

Mike Amesbury: Unemployment in Glasgow has been consistently higher than the national average, child poverty is rising and the use of food banks has increased by 20% in the past two years, so how can the Secretary of State justify closing so many jobcentres, which provide vital support for people to enter the labour market?

David Mundell: I set out in my original answer that this was a system to provide better services, and the hon. Gentleman should know that there was a full review of the proposed closures in Glasgow and that the proposal was changed in response to a public consultation.

I would not be doing my duty as Secretary of State for Scotland if I could not in my final words wish Paisley every success in the city of culture competition.
Mr Speaker: Before I call the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) to ask Question 1, I should inform the House that the text of the closed question tabled by the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) relating to economic performance and public services in the west midlands—Question 5—has, in error, been omitted from the printed copies of the Order Paper. A corrigendum—that is a wonderfully clerkly word—has been made available in the Vote Office and copies are on the Table.

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [902775] Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 6 December.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): I am sure the whole House will join me in offering condolences to the family, friends and colleagues of Police Constable James Dixon from Thames Valley Police, who was killed while on motorcycle duty yesterday, and also to the family and friends of the passenger in the car involved in the collision. I am sure the whole House will also join me in offering condolences to the family and friends of the former Member of this House, Jim Hood, who was a former miner and a strong voice for Lanarkshire in this place for nearly 30 years.

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.

Ruth George: My constituent, Kate, has run a successful nursery for more than 14 years, but after two months on the Government’s funding for three and four-year-olds, she says that she cannot make it work. She is having to sell her home to pay her staff’s redundancy payments. More than 1,000 nurseries have already closed, and 58% say that they cannot continue. If nurseries close, parents cannot work. Please will the Prime Minister meet me and the nursery owners to discuss these widespread and critical problems?

The Prime Minister: I have indeed recently met some nursery owners to look at this issue, and they have given a clear message that there are parts of the country where local authorities are operating the system very efficiently and very well, and parts of the country where that is not happening. What underpins this issue is the decision taken by this Government to improve the childcare offer for parents so that they have a better opportunity to ensure that their children get into the childcare that they need.

Q3. [902777] Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): Will the Prime Minister give us a quick update on the Brexit negotiations? Does she agree that, post-Brexit, it will be absolutely crucial that we enhance skills and apprenticeships in the construction and housing sector? Does she also agree that now is not the time for the CITB at Bircham. I am very happy to support his campaign; I wish him well, and I am happy to meet him.

My hon. Friend asked about Brexit, and what we are doing in the Brexit negotiations is ensuring that we can indeed build those houses and build the country for the future that we want to see. The principles that we are working to are that the text that is currently being discussed is a report on the progress of the negotiations, on which basis the European Commission will decide whether sufficient progress has been made to enable us to move on to the next stage of talks. It is for those future talks to agree precisely how we ensure cross-border trade while maintaining the constitutional integrity of the United Kingdom. We are leaving the European Union, and we are leaving the single market and the customs union, but we will do what is right in the interests of the whole of the United Kingdom, and nothing is agreed until everything is agreed.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I join the Prime Minister in expressing condolences about the police officer and the passenger who lost their lives in the tragic event yesterday. I also join her in paying tribute to the late Jimmy Hood, who represented Clydesdale and, later, Lanark and Hamilton East. He was a good friend of all of us, and he was a great fighter for the coal industry and the mineworkers union during the strike and after that, during his time here. We thank Jimmy for his work for the labour movement.

In July, the International Trade Secretary said that the Brexit negotiations would be “the easiest in human history”. Does the Prime Minister still agree with that assessment?

The Prime Minister: I am very pleased to report to the right hon. Gentleman that the negotiations are in progress, as I have just said, and very good progress has been made in those negotiations—[Interruption.] What the Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade, my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) has been focusing on is the trade negotiations for the future. Indeed, because we are already a member of the European Union, when we leave we will not have the same relationship with it as, say, Canada had in negotiating a trade agreement. We therefore expect to be able to get the deal that is right for the whole of the United Kingdom. To be able to do that, we need to move on to phase 2. If the right hon. Gentleman is so concerned about easing negotiations, why did his MEPs vote against enabling us to do that?

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister can always look behind her. She has not succeeded in convincing many people. Yesterday, one Tory donor told the papers: “Yesterday proved beyond doubt that” the Prime Minister “is not only weak but that it’s her incompetence that is hobbling the UK.” He was not very kind about the rest of her Front Benchers either, describing them as a “bunch of jellyfish masquerading as the cabinet”. This is truly a coalition of chaos. At the start of the week it all seemed to be going so well: the Prime Minister had scheduled a lunch with Jean-Claude Juncker,
followed by a press conference, and then was to return triumphantly to the House to present her deal.

[Interruption.]

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Let me make it clear for the umpteenth time—[Interruption.] I know what is going on. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner), but I can look after these matters. No one in this Chamber is going to be shouted down. It will not happen. If people think that they can sit where I cannot see them and make a raucous noise, they are very foolish, because I know where they are and I know what they are up to, and it is not going to work—end of subject.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** On the Prime Minister’s way back to Britain, someone forgot to share the details of the Irish border deal with the Democratic Unionist party. Surely there are 1.5 billion reasons why the Prime Minister really should not have forgotten to do that.

**The Prime Minister:** It was a little difficult to detect a question within that interruption. As President Juncker said on Monday, there are still a couple of things that we need to get right, and he is confident that we will be able to achieve sufficient progress. But if the right hon. Gentleman wants to wonder about plans for negotiations, perhaps he should look at his own Front Bench. The shadow Chancellor used to say that staying in the single market was “not respecting the referendum”, but now he says that it is “on the table”. The shadow Trade Secretary used to say that staying in the customs union was “deeply unattractive”, but now he says that it “isn’t off the table”. We now know from the shadow Chancellor what their approach really is: it is not to have a plan at all. When asked what the Labour party’s plan was, he said, “Well, that’s difficult for us.” As we all know, the only thing that the Labour party is planning for is a run on the pound.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** The Prime Minister was unable to support her Brexit Secretary when he tried to explain that a deal was supposed to have been done in October but still has not been done by December. The leader of the DUP told Irish television that she got sight of the deal only on Monday morning, five weeks after she first asked for it. Two months after the original deadline for the first phase of talks, and after Monday’s shambles, is the Prime Minister now about to end the confusion and clearly outline what the Government’s position is now with regard to the Irish border?

**The Prime Minister:** I am very happy to outline to the right hon. Gentleman the position that I have taken on the Irish border with Northern Ireland; it is exactly the same position that I took in the Lancaster House speech, that I took in the Florence speech and that we have taken consistently in the negotiations. We will ensure that there is no hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. [HON. MEMBERS: “How?”] We will do that while we respect the constitutional integrity of the United Kingdom, and while we respect and protect the internal market of the United Kingdom. [HON. MEMBERS: “How?”] I say to those Labour Members shouting “How?”, that is the whole point of the second phase of the negotiations, because we aim to deliver this as part of our overall trade deal between the United Kingdom and the European Union, and we can only talk about that when we get into phase 2. We have a plan; he has none.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** Eighteen months after the referendum, the Prime Minister is unable to answer the question. On Monday, as she thought she was coming here to make a statement, it was vetoed by the leader of the DUP—the tail really is wagging the dog here.

The Brexit Secretary told the BBC’s “Andrew Marr Show” in June:

“In my job I don’t think out loud and I don’t make guesses… I try and make decisions. You make those based on the data. That data is being gathered. We’ve got 50—nearly 60—sectoral analyses already done.”

This House voted to see those analyses, but today the Brexit Secretary told the Brexit Committee that the analyses actually do not exist. Can the Prime Minister put us out of our misery? Do they exist, or do they not? Have they done the work, or have they not? That is surely one question she can answer after 18 months.

**The Prime Minister:** May I make a gentle suggestion to the Leader of the Opposition? He asked me a question on the Northern Irish border, and I answered the question. He then stood up and said that I had not answered the question. Perhaps he should listen to the answers that I give.

The House requested, as I understand it, 58 sectoral impact assessments. There were no 58 sectoral impact assessments; there was sectoral analysis. Over 800 pages of sectoral analysis have been published and made available to the Select Committee, and arrangements have been made available for Members of this House to see them. We are very clear that we will not give a running commentary on negotiations as they proceed, but what we will do is work for what this country wants. We will ensure that we leave the European Union in March 2019. We will leave the internal market; we will leave the customs union at the same time; and we will ensure there is no hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland when we do it.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** This really is a shambles. All the Government have done is offer a heavily redacted, abbreviated version, which has not been widely shared. The Brexit Secretary said in September that a £50 billion divorce payment was “complete nonsense.” The Foreign Secretary rejected any payment and said that the EU could “go whistle.” Can the Prime Minister put before the House a fully itemised account of any proposed payment that could be independently audited by the Office for Budget Responsibility and the National Audit Office?

**The Prime Minister:** We are at the point of progressing on to the next stage. Nothing is agreed until everything is agreed, so the final settlement will not be agreed until we have got the whole deal agreed. The right hon. Gentleman asked me earlier about hard borders. Half the Labour party wants to stay in the single market and half the Labour party wants to leave the single market. The only hard border around is right down the middle of the Labour party.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** Eighteen months since the referendum, there are no answers to the questions. Today, the Government have not yet concluded phase 1, and there
are no answers to the questions and the DUP appears to be ruling the roost and telling the Prime Minister what to do.

Whether it is Brexit, the national health service, social care, our rip-off railways, rising child poverty, growing pensioner poverty or universal credit, this Government are unable to solve important issues facing this country. In fact, they are making them worse. The economy is slowing; more people are in poverty; and the Brexit negotiations are in a shambles. This Government are clearly not fit for the future. If they cannot negotiate a good deal, would it not be better if they just got out of the way?

The Prime Minister: Week in, week out, the right hon. Gentleman comes to this House making promises he knows he cannot deliver, and Labour Members keep doing it. At the election, he told students that they would write off their student debt, and then he said, “I did not commit to write off the debt.” But what is the Labour party doing? It is putting around leaflets that say, “Labour will cancel existing student debt.” It is time he apologised for the grossly misleading Labour leaflets.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. We have a closed question from Mr Michael Fabricant.

Public Services: West Midlands

Q5. [902779] Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of the (a) economic performance and (b) level of provision of public services in the west midlands; and if she will make a statement.

The Prime Minister: I am pleased to say that employment in the west midlands has risen by 198,000 since the 2010 election. In the Budget, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor confirmed that people living and working in the west midlands will benefit from a second devolution deal and a £250 million allocation for regional transport projects.

Michael Fabricant: The devolution deal, the Budget and now the establishment of the national battery research and development centre in the west midlands put the whole region at the very heart of European autonomous-drive and electric-drive cars. So will my right hon. Friend commit to continuing to support this important industry? Will she make a very important promise to me? [Hon. Members: “Ooh!”] Yes. Will she get rid of that gas-guzzler Jaguar of hers in No. 10 Downing Street and get a modern Jaguar, an electric one, from the west midlands, because we are the party of the future, not the old Labour dinosaurs opposite?

The Prime Minister: Perhaps I could just let my hon. Friend know that, sadly, the Jaguar in No. 10 Downing Street is not mine, but he is absolutely right that the west midlands is at the heart of this important industry. We are investing £31 million in the west midlands for the development of testing infrastructure for connected and autonomous vehicles, and we will also build on west midlands expertise in self-driving cars as we invest a further £5 million in an initial 5G testbed. I certainly look forward to seeing this technology developing further.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): May I associate myself with the remarks of the Prime Minister regarding the late Jimmy Hood and pass on the condolences of Scottish National party Members to his family and friends?

I am sure the House will also want to join me in welcoming Billy Irving, one of the Chennai six, who has arrived back in Scotland this morning.

So now we know that the deal that was done with the DUP to keep the Prime Minister in office gave the DUP a veto over Brexit. It is embarrassing that it was being briefed on Monday morning that the Prime Minister had a deal, only to take this off the table after a call with the DUP. Is this a Prime Minister who is in office but not in power?

The Prime Minister: What we are doing is working for a deal that will work for the whole United Kingdom. There are particular circumstances for Northern Ireland, because it is the one part of the UK that shares a land border with a country that will be remaining in the European Union. But as we look ahead, and during the negotiations, as the right hon. Gentleman will know, we are consulting and talking to all parts of the UK—the Welsh Government and the Scottish Government. We want to ensure that we get the right deal for the UK. That is the deal that I have set out: we will be leaving the European Union; we will be leaving the single market; we will be leaving the customs union; but we will ensure that we get that good trade deal for the future.

Ian Blackford: The clock is ticking, and we need a deal that keeps us in the single market and the customs union—to do otherwise will devastate our economy and cost jobs. Will the Prime Minister recognise that such a deal will resolve the Irish border question and protect jobs throughout the UK? Anything less will be a failure of leadership.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman continues to bark up the wrong tree. We are leaving the European Union. That means we will be leaving the single market and leaving the customs union. We will take back and ensure that we can do trade deals around the rest of the world. That will be important for us. He references jobs and it will be important in ensuring jobs in this country. We will get a good deal on trade and security, because this is not just about trade for our future relationship. I set out in my Florence speech the deep and special partnership we want to continue to have with the European Union. That is about a trade deal that ensures jobs and prosperity across the whole United Kingdom.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I just politely observe that the Front-Bench exchanges have absorbed a disproportionately large share of the time, but I am determined to accommodate Back Benchers who are waiting to ask their questions.

Q9. [902783] Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): The bottleneck on the A417 continues to cause dreadful accidents, as well as traffic misery in Gloucestershire. Following the leadership of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport and with the support of Members from Gloucestershire, the vital consultation stage on the shortlisted improvement proposals will begin shortly.
Does my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister back the scheme, and does she agree that by committing hundreds of millions of pounds to this crucial project, the Government are backing the Gloucestershire economy?

The Prime Minister: I know that my hon. Friend has been working tirelessly on this issue. I understand the concerns and frustrations of drivers in his constituency and elsewhere about this vital strategic road, which is vital for not only Gloucestershire but the wider region. I am happy to assure him that we are backing the development of the multimillion-pound Air Balloon roundabout scheme, which was announced in 2014. A consultation will begin shortly, so that we can develop the right solution to tackle this pinch-point and continue our support, which, as my hon. Friend said, is good for the whole of Gloucestershire’s economy.

Q2. [902776] Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): The Prime Minister has been unable to provide us with a single plausible Brexit scenario that will meet her red lines and be acceptable to her Cabinet, to Ireland and to the DUP. Is it not therefore time that she dropped either her red lines, the DUP, or the pretence that she can govern this country?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady is just completely wrong. The Government have published a number of documents that set out the various options that can be taken forward with respect to the future trade relationship, that address the whole question of the customs relationship and that would address the issue of the Northern Ireland border. We have already published those proposals in detail. Those details are not part of the negotiations at the moment; they will become part of the negotiations when we move on to phase 2.

Q13. [902787] Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): When the British people voted to leave the European super-state, they voted to end the free movement of people, to stop sending billions and billions of pounds to the EU each and every year, and to make our laws in our own country, judged by our own judges. Are we still on course to deliver that? If we have a problem, would it help if I came over to Brussels with the Prime Minister to sort it out?

The Prime Minister: I am always happy to spend time in my hon. Friend’s company. I hope that his petition on chicken farms went down well the other evening. The answer is, yes, we are on course to deliver what the people of this country voted for when they voted to leave the European Union.

Q4. [902778] John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister support new trans-Pennine rail links, namely High Speed 3, and also the restoration of the Skipton-Colne link, which, as well as providing an economic boost to Pennine towns, has the additional merit of starting in the constituency of the Government Chief Whip, the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith)?

The Prime Minister: We are of course looking seriously at and have been supportive of the concept of the trans-Pennine railway. As I understand it, we are waiting for specific proposals to be brought forward. We will of course look at those proposals very seriously.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): I am sure the whole House is aware that 40 years ago today, this House came together and voted for a new charity, Motability, which has transformed the lives of disabled people and their families. Does the Prime Minister agree that the success, started by Lord Goodman when he was chairman and now continued by Lord Sterling, should be carried forward? Motability gives a golden opportunity for disabled people to get into the workplace and enjoy the things that everybody else in this country does.

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for marking the 40th anniversary of Motability in this way, and I am very happy to join him in that. I am looking forward to becoming a senior patron of the charity, because it does excellent work for people with disabilities, enabling them to stay mobile and active. There are more people with a Motability car today than there were in 2010. I also wish my right hon. Friend well, as I understand that he will be going to the Palace tomorrow to receive his well-deserved knighthood.

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his remarks. The simple answer to his question is yes. He will know, as will other Members of this House, that there are already areas in which there are specific arrangements between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland—for example, the single energy market that exists between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. We want to ensure that there is no hard border; that is exactly what we are working for. We are also working to respect the constitutional integrity of the United Kingdom and to protect the internal market of the United Kingdom, and I think that we share those aims.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): The Prime Minister will be aware of a Citizens Advice Scotland report, which was issued yesterday, that said that, in Scotland, up to a million consumers pay on average 30% more to have parcels delivered than the rest of the country. In my Moray constituency, this is a huge issue where ridiculous prices are put on to deliver to our area, and, in some cases, companies refuse to deliver at all. Will she tell me what the UK Government can do, with me, to ensure that we right this wrong once and for all?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this issue and speak up on behalf of his constituents in this way. As I am sure he knows, Royal Mail does provide a universal postal service that includes parcel services five days a week at a uniform price throughout the United Kingdom, but there are commercial issues that play outside this service. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Business Secretary will be happy to meet him and discuss the issue.
Q7. [902781] Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): The recognition by Donald Trump of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel will do grave damage to the prospects for a just and lasting peace settlement between the Israelis and the Palestinians, which has been British, and indeed American, foreign policy for decades. Was she consulted about that announcement, and, if so, what did she say? Will she, here and now, unequivocally and clearly condemn it?

The Prime Minister: I intend to speak to President Trump about this matter, but our position has not changed—as the right hon. Gentleman says, it has been a long-standing one. It is also a very clear one: the status of Jerusalem should be determined in a negotiated settlement between the Israelis and the Palestinians, and Jerusalem should ultimately form a shared capital between the Israeli and Palestinian states. We continue to support a two-state solution. We recognise the importance of Jerusalem and our position on that has not changed.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Today, GlaxoSmithKline joined Merck, AstraZeneca and many other companies and charities investing in British bioscience genetics. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this investment in science and research underpins not only jobs but a revolution in medical treatment, which will save lives and give hope to many patients for new treatments?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. She has highlighted a very important sector for which she has referred. That is why this sector is one of the sectors that have been given such significance in the industrial strategy that my right hon. Friend the Business Secretary has published. It is exactly an area where we see benefits in the form not only of investment and jobs in the UK, but, as she says, of improving the treatments available for patients and of improving their lives.

Q8. [902782] Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): When the Prime Minister rings up Donald Trump to express our concern about his moves concerning Jerusalem and the US embassy, will she also inform him that we will be proceeding to recognise the state of Palestine as a central part of keeping the two-state process in play?

The Prime Minister: We want to see a negotiated settlement between the Israelis and the Palestinians. We believe that that should be based on a two-state solution, with a sovereign and viable Palestinian state, but also a secure and safe Israel. That should be a matter for negotiation between the parties.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): The whole House will support what the Prime Minister said about the unfolding humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen during her visit to the middle east last week. Will she continue to provide the maximum amount of pressure to lift both the humanitarian and the commercial blockades, and use Britain’s good offices at the United Nations to secure a resumption of some sort of political peace process that is inclusive and that does not have any preconditions?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend raises an important issue. I am sure that everybody across the whole House is deeply concerned about the spiralling humanitarian crisis in Yemen and the lingering threat of famine there. As he said, I raised my concerns when I visited Saudi Arabia last week. I made it clear that the UK wants to see Hodeidah port open not just for humanitarian vessels with aid able to get in, but for commercial vessels as well. This is crucial and important. My right hon. Friend referenced the need for peace talks. That is our top priority. The best way to bring a long-term solution and stability is with a political solution. We will continue to support the efforts of the UN special envoy and to play a leading role in diplomatic efforts to ensure that a political solution can be reached.

Q10. [902784] Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Due to the £1 billion deal, the Democratic Unionist party MPs reveal in an analogy that each one is worth more than Ronaldo. When we look at the value of the Scottish Tories, we need to consider the £2.5 billion cut to Scotland’s budget, the £600 million rail shortfall, the £200 million in common agricultural policy convergence that has been stolen, and the £140 million VAT refund that we are still due. Each one of these Scottish Tories costs Scotland £265 million, so can we free transfer them?

The Prime Minister: It is time that the hon. Gentleman actually looked at the facts when he stands up to ask his questions. It is my Scottish Conservative colleagues who have ensured that we were able to take steps in the Budget in relation to the VAT status of Police Scotland and the fire services in Scotland. He obviously had not noticed—but I am happy to repeat this to him—that £2 billion extra will go to Scotland as a result of the Budget.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): In 2010, the Conservative-led Government set out to reform the school curriculum in order to give our children the skills they need to succeed. Does the Prime Minister agree with me that yesterday’s reading standards results are a vindication of our reforms and our amazing teachers’ efforts, which will allow our children to forge a truly global Britain?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising an important issue. I am very happy to agree with her on this. Yesterday, we learnt how the UK’s revolution in phonics has dramatically improved school standards. I pay particular tribute to the Minister for School Standards, who has worked tirelessly to this end throughout his time in the House. I also pay tribute to the hard work of teachers up and down the country. I will just give the House the figures. In 2012, 58% of six-year-olds passed reading checks; that figure has risen to 81% this year. We are, indeed, building a Britain that is fit for the future.

Q11. [902785] Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): In October, the Prime Minister wrote an open letter saying that “EU citizens living lawfully in the UK today will be able to stay.” But my constituent, Francoise Milne, was told this week by UK Visas and Immigration that she had to wait until Brexit was done and then take her chances. Will the Prime Minister tell us whether the EU citizens
living here are just pawns in the Brexit negotiations, or will she change UKVI's operating systems to ensure that EU citizens can stay?

The Prime Minister: The position on EU citizens that I set out in my open letter is the position of the United Kingdom Government. If the hon. Lady has a complaint about something that UKVI has said, I suggest that she sends that information to the Immigration Minister.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Yesterday, the all-party parliamentary group on cancer held its annual Britain Against Cancer conference—the largest one-day gathering of the cancer community in the UK—to launch our report on the cancer strategy. We heard from the Government and NHS England about the many good things that are happening. But there is one issue that is causing real concern to frontline services: the delay in the release of the transformation funding to those frontline services, courtesy of an additional requirement applied to the funding after the bidding process closed. I have discussed the issue with the Secretary of State for Health, who is a jolly chap. Will the Prime Minister meet me to discuss the matter further?

The Prime Minister: Of course this is an important issue. As my hon. Friend said, we have seen great progress in providing higher standards of cancer care for all patients. Survival rates are at a record high and about 7,000 more people are surviving cancer after successful NHS treatment compared to three years ago. Of course we want to do more on this issue. He raised a very specific point. I understand that the Department of Health is adopting a phased approach to investment, as the national cancer programme runs for a further three years. I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the matter.

Q12. [902786] Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Contrary to the Prime Minister’s previous answer on this subject, only her Government can remove barriers to universal credit for terminally ill people in Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Will she answer the question again? Will she end the cruel requirement for people across the UK who do not want to know they are dying to self-certify on universal credit?

The Prime Minister: I will ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to look at this issue. As the hon. Gentleman knows, we are working on how universal credit is rolled out and how it is dealt with in relation to individuals. I am sure he will understand that if particular things within universal credit apply to people in particular circumstances, they can be applied only if the jobcentres are aware of those circumstances. I will ask the Department for Work and Pensions to look at the matter.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Before my right hon. Friend next goes to Brussels, will she apply a new coat of paint to her red lines, because I fear that on Monday they were beginning to look a little bit pink?

The Prime Minister: No. I happily say to my hon. Friend that the principles on which the Government are negotiating were set out in the Lancaster House speech and in the Florence speech, and those principles remain.

Q14. [902788] Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): This morning, London MPs were briefed by the Metropolitan Police Service on the grave challenge of serious youth violence and violent crime, including the scourge of scooter-assisted crime. While robberies are up 30% in London, the police service in London faces a £400-million squeeze that will drive police numbers down to their lowest in 20 years, and my own borough has already lost 198 police officers. Does the Prime Minister still think that we have the police resources we need?

The Prime Minister: We are not reducing the Metropolitan police budget. We are protecting police budgets. They were protected in the 2015 spending review. I repeat what I have said in this House before: there is more money and there are more officers for each Londoner than is the case anywhere else in the country. Of course, it is up to the Mayor of London to decide how that budget is spent. The hon. Lady also raised the important issue of scooter or moped crime. I am pleased to say that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has held a roundtable with police and others in the Home Office to look at how that can be better addressed.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): The industrial strategy identifies that the world will need 60% more food by 2050. As we leave the EU, will the Prime Minister commit to supporting our farmers?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to commit to supporting our farmers. Markets for British food are growing around the world and we want them to grow even further. Leaving the EU means that we will have an opportunity to design a new approach to agricultural policy—one that supports our farmers to grow more, to sell more and to export more of their world-class products. We will ensure that we have an agricultural policy that actually meets the needs of the United Kingdom.

Q15. [902789] Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): This week, motor manufacturers announced a year-on-year drop in car sales of more than 11%. They blame confusion caused by the Government’s incoherent policy on clean air and diesels. Budget measures and uncertainty caused by Brexit. This industry is vital to both the national economy and jobs in the west midlands. What will the Government do to turn this around?

The Prime Minister: If the hon. Gentleman had listened to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant), he would have heard how we are supporting the automotive industry—crucially, supporting the future of the automotive industry. We recognise its importance for the west midlands and its importance for the United Kingdom. That is why we are very clear in our industrial strategy that it is one of those sectors that we will be supporting so that we can support these jobs and its prosperity for the future.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that she is aware of the very strong enthusiasm for free trade deals with the UK from countries like Canada, Japan, the United
States and Australia, and even for UK participation in the Trans-Pacific Partnership? But none of these opportunities will come our way if we remain shackled to EU regulation after we have left the EU.

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to say to my hon. Friend that I do recognise the enthusiasm out there around the rest of the world for us to do trade deals with other countries. I am happy to say that my right hon. Friend the International Trade Secretary was recently in Australia discussing just these opportunities. When I go around the world, I also hear the same message from a whole variety of countries—they want to do trade deals for us in the future. We want to ensure that we get a good trade deal with the European Union and the freedom to negotiate these trade deals around the rest of the world.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Diolch yn fawr, Mr Llefarydd. On Monday evening, during the opening speeches on the EU (Withdrawal) Bill, those on the Government Benches showed their true colours. Revealed were the imperial British Government’s intentions spelled out in red, white and blue. Would the Prime Minister care to echo the Chair of the Welsh Affairs Committee, who said, “It is a power grab, and what a wonderful power grab it is too”? Or would she admit that the scrabble to repatriate powers from Brussels provides a grubby excuse to deny our democratic rights in Wales?

The Prime Minister: I think the hon. Lady knows full well that what my hon. Friend was saying was that when we leave the European Union we will be grabbing powers back from Brussels to the United Kingdom, and that is exactly right. Following that, we expect to see a significant increase in the decision-making power of devolved Administrations as a result, and that is absolutely right. If Plaid Cymru Members are saying that they want to see powers rest in Brussels, we take a different view—we want those powers to be here in the United Kingdom.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): Today, shortlisted cities are making their final pitches in the campaign to be named UK city of culture in 2021. Will the Prime Minister join me in wishing the Stoke-on-Trent team every success in their bid to see Stoke-on-Trent become the next city of culture for Britain?

The Prime Minister: I have been very happy to visit Stoke-on-Trent on a number of occasions. My hon. Friend is a valiant champion for Stoke-on-Trent, and I wish it all the best, but I have to say to him that I have been asked about a number of other bids from cities around the United Kingdom. I am sure that all those cities that are bidding have extremely good cases to be recognised in this way.
Points of Order

12.49 pm

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: There is a considerable appetite for points of order today. Let us begin with Mr Pete Wishart.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am grateful to you—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Members should not go walking past the hon. Gentleman’s line of sight.

Pete Wishart: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The ongoing farce on the release of the Brexit analysis papers, as mandated by a binding vote of this House on 1 November, continues today as the Secretary of State now says that no such papers exist. This follows papers being made available in the most bizarre circumstances in a restricted reading room; media reports suggest that there is nothing other than rehashed public announcements and stuff included in old press releases. The Government have singularly failed to meet the requirements of that binding vote in the House six weeks ago and must surely be in contempt. I have written to you on this matter, Mr Speaker, and await your reply, noting your generosity and typical and immense patience. However, this must come to an end. It is a case of either full compliance or contempt proceedings commencing.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Members should not go walking past the hon. Gentleman’s line of sight.

Mr Speaker: Order. I will come to other Members. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order and for his characteristic courtesy in giving me advance notice of it. Moreover, I understand, because it has oft been stated by him, his very real concern about this matter. I do not merely understand it but respect it. He said that the matter must be, as he put it, brought to an end. Let me say to him that I am very conscious of my responsibilities and I will discharge them. The matter is of considerable importance and interest to Members in all parts of the House. Moreover, it has been going on for a considerable period. Quite properly, it has been the subject of exchanges between the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union and the Select Committee which has had ownership of the matter in dispute.

That said, and aware as I am of reports of this morning’s exchanges in the Committee, I do not propose to rush to judgment now on the basis of what may be incomplete reports of what was said in the Committee this morning. Let me say in terms that should be clear and, I should have thought, uncontentious to the hon. Gentleman and to the House, that I await the Committee’s conclusions on the evidence that it has heard. When I receive that material I will study it without delay and I will return to the House in similar vein.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker, relating to that very issue. As you rightly say, Sir, the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union appeared before the Select Committee this morning, and it has considered the matter, but we have not yet finished our deliberations. I did not want the impression to be given that we had already done that.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is always ready to be helpful. He indicated earlier his willingness to help the Prime Minister, and he has now indicated his willingness to help me. His generosity of spirit and willingness to ensure that I am kept fully in the picture are greatly appreciated in the Chair.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Your remarks today have been extremely clear. For Members who are not on the Committee—I first put questions to the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union on 5 September—would you expect a letter from those Members in line with chapter 8 of “Erskine May”, or do you believe that that is a matter solely for the Select Committee to conclude? I would be grateful for your judgment on that.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. I am not sure that it would be right for me to expect letters from Members on the basis that he has set out. It is perfectly open on this matter—or, indeed, for that matter, on any other—for any interested hon. or right hon. Member to write to me. That said, I have tried to indicate to the House that as the Exiting the European Union Committee has ownership of the issue—quite specifically for the benefit of those attending to our proceedings beyond the House, it has ownership in the sense that the call by the House was for the release of material to the Committee—I am interested to hear from the Committee. One way or the other, I rather imagine, whatever it wishes to say, that I shall do so.

I hope that that is helpful, but if the right hon. Gentleman is eager to rush to his computer and bash out a communication to me with the zeal and alacrity for which he is renowned in all parts of the House, I shall await the results of his labours.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD) rose—

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab) rose—

Mr Speaker: I am coming to the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), but first I call Chuka Umunna.

Chuka Umunna: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I take note of the comments that you have just made. This is related to the documents that were promised to the House. There is an issue regarding the motion that we debated in the Chamber the other day, and there is an issue regarding what has been said to the Select Committee—I note what you said about it needing to come to a judgment itself—but there is a new issue in relation to statements that have been made in the House. On 20 October, in oral questions to the Department for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) asked the Secretary of State:

“Will the Secretary of State tell us what assessment his or any other Department has made of the impact of leaving the EU on the economy, and when will he make that available to the House?”

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union replied in the Chamber:
[Chuka Umunna]

“We currently have in place an assessment of 51 sectors of the economy. We are looking at those one by one.”—[Official Report, 20 October 2016; Vol. 615, c. 938.]

In the hearing by the Exiting the European Union Committee this morning, he was asked by the Chairman, “has the Government undertaken any impact assessments on the implications of leaving the EU for different sectors of the economy?” His reply was, “Not in sectors...There’s no sort of systematic impact assessment, no.” There is a clear contradiction between the statement given to the Committee this morning and what the Secretary of State said at the Dispatch Box in the House on 20 October, which, to me, provides strong evidence that perhaps the House has been misled on the issue.

Mr Speaker: I am always grateful to the hon. Gentleman, both for his skill and for his prodigious industry. He is, by background, if my memory serves me correctly, a lawyer, so I am not surprised to be reminded of his lawyerly quality: his attention to detail and his appetite for studying the Official Report. I hope that he will not take it amiss if I say that I am not entirely unmindful myself of the content of the Official Report and of various exchanges that have taken place. That material naturally comes my way, and I study it. I do not think it would be right to engage in textual exegesis on the Floor of the House.

When the Committee’s completed consideration is presented to me, if it is, and I am invited to make a judgment, I will make it, and I will be mindful of all the matters that the hon. Gentleman has highlighted—and potentially others, which hon. and right hon. Members in any part of the House wish to bring to my attention. I do not honestly think that there is much to add, but the Liberal Democrat party would be sadly disappointed if we did not hear from the right hon. Member for Clwyd South (Mr Jones), who was then a Brexit Minister, said in March this year “so that we can analyse what Brexit might mean” for different sectors. The right hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones), who was then a Brexit Minister, said in March this year

“There is...a lot of work going on to address all sorts of eventualities.”

A number of Members of Parliament have put in freedom of information requests to access those reports, but they have been rejected on the basis that information released would prejudice the interests of the United Kingdom. Having reviewed the sectoral reports, there is absolutely nothing in them that could not have been obtained by a very detailed Library information briefing—

Mr Speaker: Order. I do not wish to prolong this exchange. The right hon. Gentleman is unfailingly courteous to me, and I have no wish to be discourteous to him. Those matters which are familiar to him will be familiar to others. They may or may not be judged germane by the Committee in putting together its report, and therefore reaching its conclusions. I do not think that its conclusions will be influenced by points of order now on the Floor of the House. I completely understand why Members wish to give vent to their concern—that is perfectly proper—but I am afraid I have simply to repeat that if I am approached, if I receive a letter on this matter and related material, I will study it. I have tried to give a clear indication to the House that if I am so approached with responsibility to take a decision, I certainly intend to take my responsibility seriously and discharge it efficiently, which means, among other things, without undue delay. I hope that that is clear. If there are no more points of order—

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): No!

Mr Speaker: No, no more, says the right hon. Member for Brexiter—[Laughter]. I am very sorry for my discourtesy to the right hon. Gentleman; he is the last person that I could call a Brexiteer. He is from Exeter, not Brexiter, and if there were such a place, he would not wish to live there. I realise that—[Interjection.] And the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) chunters from a sedentary position that she would not want to live there either. I am well aware of that.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Very well. If there is a final point of order, I will try to treat of it briefly. Is it on the same matter?

Seema Malhotra: On the same matter, but slightly different.

Mr Speaker: Slightly different. I will indulge the hon. Lady, briefly.

Seema Malhotra: The House has been rightly informed by my fellow Select Committee Member, the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), that we are still undergoing some deliberations. May I ask your advice on a related point? If the Secretary of State said to the Lords Committee and the Foreign Affairs Committee a year ago that quantitative assessments of the impact of various scenarios were being undertaken, and said to another Select Committee today that that work had not been undertaken and that, in fact, the impact assessments had not begun, what procedure is there to address the point about evidence given one year being very different from that given the following year?

Mr Speaker: The answer is, frankly, the same as that which I have given to other hon. Members, which is, to cut to the chase, that if any Member believes that a contempt of the House has taken place, the proper approach is for that Member to write to me privately about the matter. As I said, I would encourage Members to wait to hear the Committee’s conclusions before rushing to judgment, but that is the appropriate recourse. I will not make an assessment and pronounce now. I will look at it. I would simply say again that all these matters will be considered by the Exiting the European Union Committee. I think that it is clear that its work
will shortly conclude and I will then assess anything that comes my way. I will do so in a timely manner. I could hardly be more explicit than that, and I hope that it is regarded by the House as helpful.

We will now move on to the motion on the ten-minute rule Bill. I must say that when I was at university with the hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin), he did not always strike me as the most patient member of the university’s student union—he used to shout at me very noisily from a sedentary position every time I got up to speak, although his behaviour has improved modestly over the past 30 years. It seems that his patience is slightly greater, because it has had to be—he has on this occasion been waiting patiently.

Sanctions (Human Rights Abuse and Corruption)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

1.3 pm

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to enable the Secretary of State to refuse entry, or to vary or curtail leave to enter or remain already granted, to a person who is a non-UK or non-EEA national who is known to be, or to have been, involved in gross human rights abuses or in certain acts of corruption; to make provision for financial sanctions against a person who is a non-UK or non-EEA national who is known to be, or to have been, involved in gross human rights abuses or in certain acts of corruption; and for connected purposes.

Or, Mr Speaker, as laws like this are known around the world, a Magnitsky Act. I speak today in memory of Sergei Magnitsky, who died in Russian police custody eight years ago. The story of his death is an allegory of Vladimir Putin’s Russia: brutal, corrupt and oppressive. Vladimir Putin and Sergei Magnitsky could not have been more different. Putin is an unreconstructed KGB thug and gangster who loots his country and murders his opponents in Russia and here, as we know, on the streets of London. Sergei Magnitsky was a brave and incorruptible accountant and lawyer who was arrested, detained in squalid, often freezing, prisons, tortured and denied medical attention. After a year, on 16 November 2009, he was beaten by eight riot guards in a Moscow prison, while he was chained to a bed, until he died, at the age of 37, leaving a wife and two children.

Magnitsky was targeted and eventually killed because he exposed a huge $230 million tax fraud involving senior Russian Government officials. The United States, Canada, Estonia and Lithuania have passed legislation imposing visa bans and asset freezes on those people who were responsible for his terrible fate and also on those responsible for similar appalling abuses of human rights and acts of corruption elsewhere. The American Magnitsky Act, for example, was a bipartisan Bill introduced by Senator John McCain and was passed in 2012 by 92 votes to four in the Senate and by 90% of members of the House of Representatives. Similar legislation is under development in South Africa, France, Ukraine and Gibraltar.

These pieces of legislation make use of two modes of punishing these corrupt officials and organised criminals: asset freezes and travel bans. Here in the UK, the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab) introduced the Magnitsky amendment to the Criminal Finances Bill, which introduced the asset-freezing element of a Magnitsky law to the UK and which was passed with cross-party support earlier this year. But there still is no legislation that deals with visa bans for human rights violators and so far no assets have been frozen, so my proposals would go much further and give the Government powers to sanction individuals found guilty of corruption and human rights abuse with visa bans, asset freezes and public placement on a list of banned foreign criminals.

Magnitsky was arrested, tortured and killed by the people responsible for the crime he was investigating. In a terrible reminder of the Stalin era, there was then a posthumous show trial in which he was tried and convicted of the tax fraud he had been killed for investigating. The comparisons between Putin’s brutal kleptocracy
and Communist-era brutality do not end there. Just like in the past, Putin's Russia murders its opponents at home and—as we saw with the assassination of Alexander Litvinenko—here on the streets of London as well.

The Memorial Human Rights Centre, the most respected human rights organisation in Russia, recently published its annual report about political prisoners, showing that 117 people are in Russian prisons today for no other reason than their opposition to the Government. To put that in context, in his 1975 Nobel lecture Andrei Sakharov listed 126 prisoners of conscience in the USSR. Just like in the Soviet era, there is censorship and Government-driven propaganda in all the major media outlets—not just in Russia but here in the west, and the UK too, with outlets such as RT and Sputnik.

Just like in the Soviet era, there are no free or fair elections and opponents of the Government are routinely and publicly denounced as enemies, traitors and foreign agents, but, as Vladimir Kara-Murza, the vice-chair of Open Russia, which promotes civil society and democracy in Russia, explained to me, for all these parallels, there is one major difference. Members of the Soviet Politburo were not able to hide their money in western banks, send their children to study in western schools, or buy expensive property across London and the home counties.

That is exactly what the people running Russia today are doing: they steal in Russia and spend in the west.

There is no doubt that London is one of the main destinations for money looted from Russia and elsewhere. Huge sums of the money stolen in the tax fraud that Magnitsky was investigating were subsequently laundered out of Russia. Hermitage Capital Management submitted detailed evidence to the UK authorities of $30 million that was smuggled into Britain between 2008 and 2012, some of it by firms run or owned by the Russian mafia, but no UK investigation has been launched, so the Magnitsky case also shines a light on weaknesses in our own justice system.

According to a 2016 report by the Commons Select Committee on Home Affairs, £100 billion is laundered through the UK’s banks each year, yet the National Crime Agency estimates that only 0.2% of that amount is frozen. They might as well put up a sign at Heathrow to welcome Putin’s crooks and gangsters.

It is very clear a measure such as this would have a real impact. Putin’s reaction to the US legislation proves that beyond doubt. He declared that repealing the Magnitsky Act was his single largest foreign policy priority. He got so angry about the legislation that the Russian Government banned Americans from adopting sick and ill Russian children. Healthy children are not put up for adoption by western families, but so squalid is the behaviour of Putin’s regime that he is prepared to punish sick Russian orphans, who often die in an orphanage if they are not adopted by foreigners.

The Home Secretary may say that she already has the right to refuse visas for anyone, but that power is not currently being used. Many of the most pernicious human rights abusers from Russia and elsewhere are able to come to and go from Britain as they please. Furthermore, to the extent that someone is banned, the Government refuse to disclose their names. A specific statutory provision aimed at sanctioning those involved in human rights abuses would both focus the attention of those applying that law and introduce greater transparency in the exercise of powers to impose visas. The public have a right to know who has been banned from entering the country, and perhaps more importantly, a right to know who has not been banned despite there being a convincing case that they are personally responsible for committing grave human rights transgressions.

I want to make a final point before I conclude. Putin and the Kremlin claim such measures are somehow anti-Russian, but nothing could be further from the truth. The late Boris Nemtsov said the opposite when he called the Magnitsky Act the “most pro-Russia act ever passed in a foreign country.”

A law like this is not aimed at the Russian people; it is aimed at those who murder Russian people and steal from Russian people. We should be very clear that there is a world of difference between the Russian people and their country on the one hand, and the kleptocratic, authoritarian dictatorship that misrules it on the other.

Sergei Magnitsky was an ordinary man, but he was clearly also an exceptionally brave man. He died because he believed it was wrong for corrupt officials to enrich themselves by stealing from the people with impunity, and that it was wrong that such a power should operate without being checked by the rule of law. He was arrested on trumped-up charges, held in horrific conditions in pre-trial detention for a year, beaten and eventually killed.

It is up to us whether or not Sergei Magnitsky’s death means something. If we choose to ignore rule by force and fail to challenge the corrupt pillaging of money belonging to the Russian state and, by extension, to the Russian people, he died for nothing. However, if we act against those responsible for his death and the crimes he uncovered, and against similar people across the world, his death will have achieved something. He died for the idea that if people transgress the basic norms of human liberty in a democracy, there are consequences. We can show that if people commit these crimes, they may not enjoy the freedom to travel and spend their stolen money across the globe, because they will be pursued for their wrongdoing.

There is something else at stake here. Our country invented the very idea of liberty, and we wrote the laws by which much of the world is run. Democracy, freedom, fairness, respect for the law—these are the values that make this the greatest country in the world. It is easy to boast about our commitment to these values, but they must stand for something too, and that is why we cannot ignore appalling crimes such as Sergei Magnitsky’s brutal murder.

**Question put and agreed to.**

**Ordered.**

That Ian Austin, Mr Kenneth Clarke, Mr Andrew Mitchell, Mr John Whittingdale, Mr Ben Bradshaw, Yvette Cooper, Tom Tugendhat, Rachel Reeves, Ian Blackford, Caroline Lucas, Tom Brake and Dame Margaret Hodge present the Bill.

Ian Austin accordingly presented the Bill.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 February 2018, and to be printed (Bill 139).*
European Union (Withdrawal) Bill

[5TH AlLOCATED DAY]


Further considered in Committee

[MRS ELEANOR LAING in the Chair]

New Clause 70

NORTHERN IRELAND: THE BELFAST PRINCIPLES

“(1) The Belfast Agreement implemented in the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (which made new provision for the government of Northern Ireland for the purpose of implementing the agreement reached at multi-party talks on Northern Ireland) remains a fundamental principle of public policy after exit day.

(2) Accordingly, in the exercise by a Minister of the Crown or any devolved authority of any powers under this Act to make any provision affecting Northern Ireland the Minister or authority must have regard to the requirement to preserve and abide by the Belfast Agreement and the principles implemented in Northern Ireland Act 1998 (“the Belfast principles”).

(3) The Belfast principles include (but are not limited to) partnership, equality and mutual respect as the basis of relationships within Northern Ireland, between the North and South of Ireland, and between the islands of Ireland and Great Britain.

(4) In particular, in relation to this Act—

(a) the Secretary of State must not give consent under paragraph 6 of Schedule 2 to this Act (requirement for consent where it would otherwise be required in dealing with deficiencies arising from withdrawal) before any provision is made by a Northern Ireland department except where the Secretary State has considered the requirement to preserve and abide by the Belfast principles and considers the provision is necessary only as a direct consequence of the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the EU, and

(b) the powers under paragraph 13(b) of Schedule 7 to this Act to make supplementary, incidental, consequential, transitional, transitory or saving provision (including provision restating any retained EU law in a clearer or more accessible way) may not be exercised to do anything beyond the minimum changes strictly required only as a direct consequence of the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the EU.

(5) Section 11(3) (legislative competence of the Northern Ireland Assembly) of this Act does not permit the Northern Ireland Assembly to do anything which is not in accordance with the Belfast principles.”—[LADY HERMON.]}

This new clause is intended to preserve the principles of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement which underpin the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Brought up, and read the First time.

1.14 pm

LADY HERMON (North Down) (Ind): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (MRS ELEANOR LAING): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Amendment 338, in clause 10, page 7, line 14, at end insert—

“(2) But regulations made under Schedule 2 must not be incompatible with the full provisions of the British – Irish Agreement 1998 and the Multi-party agreement (the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement) to which it gives effect, including—

(a) the preservation of institutions set up relating to strands 1, 2 and 3 of the Good Friday Agreement,

(b) human rights and equality,

(c) the principle of consent, and

(d) citizenship rights.”

This amendment seeks to ensure that the rights provided for under the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement continue to be implemented and are protected.

Clause 10 stand part.

Amendment 307, in schedule 2, page 16, line 12, leave out “the devolved authority considers appropriate” and insert “is essential”. This amendment would limit the power available to a devolved authority to deal with deficiencies in retained EU law arising from withdrawal in such a way that it could only make provision that is essential to that end.

Amendment 209, page 16, line 13, leave out “appropriate” and insert “necessary”. This amendment would limit the power available to a Minister of the Crown acting jointly with a devolved authority to deal with deficiencies in retained EU law arising from withdrawal in such a way that they could only make provision that is essential to that end.

Amendment 201, page 16, line 18, leave out “appropriate” and insert “necessary”. This amendment would limit the power available to a Minister of the Crown acting jointly with a devolved authority to deal with deficiencies in retained EU law arising from withdrawal in such a way that they could only make provision that is essential to that end.

Amendment 207, page 16, line 33, at end insert—

“(6) Sub-paragraph (4)(b) does not apply to regulations made under this Part by the Scottish Ministers or the Welsh Ministers.”

This amendment would include the power to confer a power to legislate among the powers of the Scottish Ministers and Welsh Ministers to make regulations under Part 1 of Schedule 2 to fix problems in retained EU law arising from withdrawal, in line with a Minister of the Crown’s powers under Clause 7.

Amendment 211, page 17, line 1, leave out paragraph 3.

Amendment 167, page 17, line 9, at end insert—

“(3) This paragraph does not apply to regulations made under this Part by the Scottish Ministers or the Welsh Ministers.”

This amendment would provide that the power of the Scottish Ministers and the Welsh Ministers to make regulations under Part 1 of Schedule 2 extends to amending directly applicable EU law incorporated into UK law, in line with a Minister of the Crown’s power in Clause 7.

Amendment 168, page 17, line 13, at end insert—

“(2) This paragraph does not apply to regulations made under this Part by the Scottish Ministers or the Welsh Ministers.”

This amendment would provide that the power of the Scottish Ministers and the Welsh Ministers to make regulations under Part 1 of Schedule 2 includes the power to confer functions which correspond to functions to make EU tertiary legislation, in line with a Minister of the Crown’s power in Clause 7.
Amendment 169, page 17, line 20, at end insert—

“(2) This paragraph does not apply to regulations made under this Part by the Scottish Ministers or the Welsh Ministers.

Requirement for consultation in certain circumstances

5A No regulations may be made under this Part by the Scottish Ministers or the Welsh Ministers acting alone so far as the regulations—

(a) are to come into effect before exit day, or

(b) remove (whether wholly or partly) reciprocal arrangements of the kind mentioned in section 7(2)(c) or (e),

unless the regulations are, to that extent, made after consulting with a Minister of the Crown.”

This amendment would replace the requirement for consent from a Minister of the Crown for regulations made by Scottish Ministers or Welsh Ministers in fixing problems in retained EU law that arise from withdrawal if they come into force before exit day or remove reciprocal arrangements with a requirement for Scottish Ministers and Welsh Ministers to consult with a Minister of the Crown before making the regulations.

Amendment 135, page 20, line 18, leave out paragraph 10.

This amendment is intended to remove the proposed restriction in the Bill on devolved authorities modifying retained direct EU legislation etc.

Amendment 322, page 20, line 25, after “Crown”, insert

“and excluding any provision that could be made under paragraph 7(2) of Schedule 7B to the Government of Wales Act 2006”.

This amendment, and Amendments 323, 324 and 325, would prevent the Welsh Ministers from using powers proposed in the Bill (to deal with deficiencies in retained EU law arising from withdrawal) to amend the Government of Wales Act 2006.

Amendment 323, page 20, line 41, after “5”, insert “or”.

This amendment, and Amendments 322, 324 and 325, would prevent the Welsh Ministers from using powers proposed in the Bill (to deal with deficiencies in retained EU law arising from withdrawal) to amend the Government of Wales Act 2006.

Amendment 324, page 20, line 41, leave out “or 7”.

This amendment, and Amendments 322, 323 and 325, would prevent the Welsh Ministers from using powers proposed in the Bill (to deal with deficiencies in retained EU law arising from withdrawal) to amend the Government of Wales Act 2006.

Amendment 325, page 20, line 43, at end insert—

“(f) the provision does not modify the Government of Wales Act 2006.”

This amendment, and Amendments 322, 323 and 324, would prevent the Welsh Ministers from using powers proposed in the Bill (to deal with deficiencies in retained EU law arising from withdrawal) to amend the Government of Wales Act 2006.

Amendment 309, page 21, line 38, leave out “the devolved authority consider appropriate” and insert “is essential”.

This amendment would limit the power available to a devolved authority to prevent or remedy a breach of international obligations in such a way that it can only make provision that is essential.

Amendment 212, page 21, line 39, leave out “appropriate” and insert “necessary”.

Amendment 310, page 21, line 43, leave out “they consider appropriate” and insert “is essential”.

This amendment would limit the power available to a Minister of the Crown acting jointly with a devolved authority to prevent or remedy a breach of international obligations in such a way that they could only make provision that is essential to that end.

Amendment 213, page 21, line 43, leave out “appropriate” and insert “necessary”.

Amendment 287, page 22, line 9, after “or revoke”, insert “, or otherwise modify the effect of.”.

This amendment would ensure that the restriction in this paragraph could not be undermined by the use of legislation which does not amend the text of the Human Rights Act but modifies its effect.

Amendment 288, page 22, line 10, at end insert “, or “(f) amend, repeal or revoke, or otherwise modify the effect of, any other law relating to equality or human rights.”

This amendment would broaden the restriction in this subsection to protect all legislation relating to equality and human rights (and not only the Human Rights Act 1998).

Amendment 326, page 22, line 10, at end insert—

“(f) amend, repeal or revoke the Government of Wales Act 2006.”

This amendment would prevent the Welsh Ministers from using powers proposed in the Bill (to comply with international obligations) to amend the Government of Wales Act 2006.

Amendment 170, page 22, line 10, at end insert—

“(4A) Sub-paragraph (4)(d) does not apply to regulations made under this Part by the Scottish Ministers or the Welsh Ministers.”

This amendment would provide that the power of Scottish Ministers and Welsh Ministers to make regulations under Part 2 of Schedule 2 includes the power to confer a power to legislate, aligning those Ministers’ powers to the power of a Minister of the Crown under Clause 8.

Amendment 136, page 22, line 25, leave out paragraph 15.

This amendment is intended to remove the proposed restriction in the Bill on devolved authorities modifying retained direct EU legislation etc.

Amendment 171, page 22, line 32, at end insert—

“(3) This paragraph does not apply to regulations made under this Part by the Scottish Ministers or the Welsh Ministers.

This amendment would provide that the power of the Scottish Ministers and the Welsh Ministers to make regulations under Part 2 of Schedule 2 extends to amending directly applicable EU law incorporated into UK law. This brings the power into line with the Minister of the Crown power in Clause 8.

Amendment 172, page 23, line 11, at end insert—

“(4) This paragraph does not apply to regulations made under this Part by the Scottish Ministers or the Welsh Ministers.

Requirement for consultation in certain circumstances

16A (1) No regulations may be made under this Part by the Scottish Ministers or the Welsh Ministers acting alone so far as the regulations—

(a) are to come into effect before exit day, or

(b) are for the purpose of preventing or remedying any breach of the WTO Agreement, or

(c) make provision about any quota arrangements or are incompatible with any such arrangements,

unless the regulations are, to that extent, made after consulting with a Minister of the Crown.

(2) In sub-paragraph (1)—

“the WTO Agreement” has the meaning given in paragraph 16(2),

“quota arrangements” has the meaning given in paragraph 16(3).”

This amendment would replace the requirement for a Minister of the Crown to consent to regulations made by the Scottish Ministers or the Welsh Ministers to ensure compliance with international obligations if they come into force before exit day or relate to the WTO or quota arrangements, with a requirement for the Scottish Ministers and Welsh Ministers to consult with a Minister of the Crown before making the relevant regulations.
Amendment 311, page 24, line 11, leave out “the devolved authority considers appropriate” and insert “is essential”.

This amendment would limit the power available to a devolved authority to implement the withdrawal agreement in such a way that it could only make provision that is essential to that end.

Amendment 214, page 24, line 12, leave out “appropriate” and insert “necessary”.

Amendment 312, page 24, line 16, leave out “they consider appropriate” and insert “is essential”.

This amendment would limit the power available to a Minister of the Crown acting jointly with a devolved authority to implement the withdrawal agreement in such a way that they could only make provision that is essential to that end.

Amendment 215, page 24, line 16, leave out “appropriate” and insert “necessary”.

Amendment 289, page 24, line 32, after “or revoke”, insert “, or otherwise modify the effect of”,.

This amendment would ensure that the restriction in this paragraph could not be undermined by the use of legislation which does not amend the text of the Human Rights Act but modifies its effect.

Amendment 290, page 24, line 33, at end insert “, or (h) amend, repeal or revoke, or otherwise modify the effect of, any other law relating to equality or human rights.”

This amendment would broaden the restriction in this subsection to protect all legislation relating to equality and human rights (and not only the Human Rights Act 1998).

Amendment 327, page 24, line 33, at end insert—

“(h) amend, repeal or revoke the Government of Wales Act 2006.”

This amendment would prevent the Welsh Ministers from using powers proposed in the Bill (to implement the withdrawal agreement) to amend the Government of Wales Act 2006.

Amendment 173, page 24, line 33, at end insert—

“(4A) Sub-paragraph (4)(d) does not apply to regulations made under this Part by the Scottish Ministers or the Welsh Ministers.”

This amendment would include the power to confer a power to legislate among the powers of the Scottish Ministers and Welsh Ministers to make regulations under Part 3 of Schedule 2, in line with a Minister of the Crown’s powers under Clause 9.

Amendment 174, page 25, line 11, at end insert—

“(3) This paragraph does not apply to regulations made under this Part by the Scottish Ministers or the Welsh Ministers.”

This amendment would provide that the power of the Scottish Ministers and the Welsh Ministers to make regulations under Part 3 of Schedule 2 extends to amending directly applicable EU law incorporated into UK law, in line with the Minister of the Crown power in Clause 9.

Amendment 175, page 25, line 15, at end insert—

“(2) This paragraph does not apply to regulations made under this Part by the Scottish Ministers or the Welsh Ministers.”

This amendment would provide that the power of the Scottish Ministers and the Welsh Ministers to make regulations under Part 3 of Schedule 2 includes the power to confer functions which correspond to functions to make EU tertiary legislation.

Amendment 176, page 25, line 28, at end insert—

“(3) This paragraph does not apply to regulations made under this Part by the Scottish Ministers or the Welsh Ministers.”

Amendment 317, page 25, line 31, at end insert—

“PART []

WELSH MINISTERS—POWER TO MAKE CONSEQUENTIAL AND TRANSITIONAL PROVISION

[ ] (1) The Welsh Ministers may by regulations make such provision as is essential in consequence of this Act.

(2) The power to make regulations under sub-paragraph (1) may (among other things) be exercised by modifying any provision made by or under an enactment.

(3) In sub-paragraph (2), “enactment” does not include—

(a) primary legislation passed or made after the end of the Session in which this Act is passed, or

(b) any provision of the Government of Wales Act 2006.

(4) The Welsh Ministers may by regulations make such transitional, transitory or saving provision as is essential in connection with the coming into force of any provision of this Act or the appointment of exit day.

(5) No regulations may be made under this Part unless every provision of them is within the devolved competence of the Welsh Ministers for the purposes of Part 2.”

This amendment would provide a power to the Welsh Ministers to make consequential and transitional provision within the devolved competence of the Welsh Ministers.

That schedule 2 be the Second schedule to the Bill.

Amendment 313, in clause 7, page 5, line 7, at end insert—

“(7) But the power in subsection (1) may not be exercised to make provision for Wales to the extent that that provision would be within the devolved competence of the Welsh Ministers for the purposes of Part 1 of Schedule 2.”

This amendment would prevent a Minister of the Crown from making provision to deal with deficiencies in retained EU law arising from withdrawal to the extent that the provision would be within the devolved competence of the Welsh Ministers.

Amendment 89, page 6, line 11, at end insert—

“(da) apply to Wales unless they relate to matters specified in Schedule 7A to the Government of Wales Act 2006,

(db) apply to Scotland unless they relate to matters specified in Schedule 5 to the Scotland Act 1998,

(dc) apply to Northern Ireland unless they relate to matters specified in Schedules 2 or 3 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.”

This amendment prevents Ministers of the Crown from making regulations under the powers in Clause 7 that apply to Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland other than in relation to reserved (or, in the case of Northern Ireland, excepted and reserved) matters.

Amendment 138, page 6, line 13, after “it”, insert—

“(i) modify the Scotland Act 1998 or the Government of Wales Act 2006.”

This amendment would prevent the powers of a Minister of the Crown under Clause 7 of the Bill to fix problems in retained EU law from being exercised to amend the Scotland Act 1998 or the Government of Wales Act 2006.
Amendment 161, page 6, line 25, at end insert—

“(9) The consent of the Scottish Ministers is required before any provision is made in regulations under this section so far as the provision would be within the devolved competence of the Scottish Ministers within the meaning given in paragraph 9 of Schedule 2.

(10) The consent of the Welsh Ministers is required before any provision is made in regulations under this section so far as the provision would be within the devolved competence of the Welsh Ministers within the meaning given in paragraph 10 of Schedule 2.”

This amendment would require a Minister of the Crown to first seek the consent of the Scottish Ministers or the Welsh Ministers before making any regulations under Clause 7 on Scottish or Welsh devolved matters.

New clause 39—Provisions of the Good Friday Agreement—

“Before making any regulations under section 9, the Minister shall commit to maintaining the provisions of the Good Friday Agreement and subsequent Agreements agreed between the United Kingdom and Ireland since 1998, including—

(a) the free movement of people, goods and services on the island of Ireland,
(b) citizenship rights,
(c) the preservation of institutions set up relating to strands 1, 2 and 3 of the Good Friday Agreement,
(d) human rights and equality,
(e) the principle of consent,
(f) the status of the Irish language, and
(g) a Bill of Rights.”

Amendment 315, in clause 9, page 6, line 45, at end insert—

“( ) But the power in subsection (1) may not be exercised to make provision for Wales to the extent that that provision would be within the devolved competence of the Welsh Ministers for the purposes of Part 2 of Schedule 2.”

This amendment would prevent a Minister of the Crown from making provision to implement the withdrawal agreement to the extent that the provision would be within the devolved competence of the Welsh Ministers.

Amendment 317, in clause 17, page 14, line 11, at end insert—

“(b) amend or repeal the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (except with the intention of preserving the effects of the Belfast Agreement of 10 April 1998 after exit day).”

This amendment is intended to maintain the provisions of the Good Friday Agreement after the UK leaves the EU.

Amendment 321, in clause 17, page 14, line 4, at end insert—

“( ) But the power in subsection (1) may not be exercised to make provision for Wales to the extent that that provision would be within the devolved competence of the Welsh Ministers for the purposes of Part 2 of Schedule 2.”

This amendment would prevent a Minister of the Crown from making transitional, transitory or saving provision to the extent that the provision would be within the devolved competence of the Welsh Ministers.

Amendment 145, in clause 8, page 6, line 30, at end insert—

“( ) But the power in subsection (1) may not be exercised to make provision for Wales to the extent that that provision would be within the devolved competence of the Welsh Ministers for the purposes of Part 2 of Schedule 2.”

This amendment would prevent a Minister of the Crown from making provision to prevent or remedy any breach of international obligations to the extent that the provision would be within the devolved competence of the Welsh Ministers.

Amendment 146, page 6, line 35, at end insert—

“(b) amend or repeal the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (except with the intention of preserving the effects of the Belfast Agreement of 10 April 1998 after exit day).”

This amendment is intended to maintain the provisions of the Good Friday Agreement after the UK leaves the EU.
Amendment 159, page 6, line 38, at end insert “, or
(e) modify the Scotland Act 1998 or the Government of Wales Act 2006.”

This amendment would prevent the powers of a Minister of the Crown under Clause 8 of the Bill to ensure compliance with international obligations from being exercised to amend the Scotland Act 1998 or the Government of Wales Act 2006.

Amendment 319, page 6, line 38, at end insert “, or
(e) modify the Government of Wales Act 2006.”

This amendment would prevent the Government of Wales Act 2006 from being amended by regulations under Clause 8.

Amendment 347, page 6, line 38, at end insert—
“(e) be incompatible with the British-Irish Agreement 1998 and the Multi-party agreement (the Belfast / Good Friday Agreement) to which it gives effect, including—
(i) the preservation of institutions set up relating to strands 1, 2 and 3 of the Good Friday Agreement,
(ii) human rights and equality,
(iii) the principle of consent, and
(iv) citizenship rights.”

This amendment is intended to ensure that the power to make regulations to fulfil obligations arising out of the British-Irish Agreement could not be used in a manner incompatible with those obligations.

Amendment 162, page 6, line 40, at end insert—
“(5) The consent of the Scottish Ministers is required before any provision is made in regulations under this section so far as the provision would be within the devolved competence of the Scottish Ministers within the meaning given in paragraph 18 of Schedule 2.

(6) The consent of the Welsh Ministers is required before any provision is made in regulations under this section so far as the provision would be within the devolved competence of the Welsh Ministers within the meaning given in paragraph 19 of Schedule 2.”

This amendment would require a Minister of the Crown to first seek the consent of the Scottish Ministers or the Welsh Ministers before making any regulations under Clause 8 on Scottish or Welsh devolved matters.

Lady Hermon: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon on this very important Bill, Mrs Laing.

I am enormously grateful to the Members who put their names to my new clause 70. I am sorry that Democratic Unionist party Members did not find time to do so. I am sure they wanted to, but they have obviously been busy with other things, such as speaking to the Prime Minister. When, or if, I press my new clause to a vote this afternoon—I am clearly signalling to the Government and to you, Mrs Laing, that if I do not receive a satisfactory response from the Government, I intend to press it to a vote—it will be quite difficult, as I sit as an independent, to provide the Tellers. However, my hon. Friends—I call them friends—in the Scottish National party and the Labour party have kindly indicated that they will provide the Tellers.

I find myself in an extraordinarily difficult position. When I hear the Prime Minister and the Brexit Secretary repeat their commitment to the Good Friday agreement, as I often do, I welcome that enormously. However, I of course expected the Government to match their words, rhetoric and promises about the Good Friday agreement with actions. When I first collected my copy of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, I expected to see a commitment written in bold that the Good Friday agreement—otherwise known as the Belfast agreement—would be protected, even though the UK is going to leave the European Union.

I have read the Bill very carefully. As right hon. and hon. Members will know, the Good Friday agreement or Belfast agreement was an international agreement between the Irish Government and the British Government. As an international agreement, it had to be incorporated in our domestic law, and that was done by the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The Good Friday agreement is absolutely fundamental. It has given us peace and stability for the past 20 years in Northern Ireland, and there can be no denying that. Unfortunately, the first mention of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which incorporated the Good Friday agreement in our domestic law, is in clause 7. It is not at the beginning of clause 7 but in subsection (6), and it is not at the beginning of subsection (6) but in paragraph (f) at the end.

For the benefit of Members—including DUP Members, who have been busy doing other things, as I have said—let me take a moment to read out clause 7(6). Ministers will be given sweeping powers under clause 7 to do what they consider appropriate to prevent, remedy or mitigate deficiencies in retained EU law. The point I must emphasise to the Committee is that the sweeping powers provided in clauses 7 to 10 are replicated or duplicated in schedule 2 for the devolved authorities. The reference to the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which I struggled to find, is in clause 7(6). It states:

“regulations made under this section may not...amend or repeal the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (unless the regulations are made by virtue of paragraph 13(b) of Schedule 7 to this Act or are amending or repealing paragraph 38 of Schedule 3 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998 or any provision of that Act which modifies another enactment).”

I commend the legislative draftsmen and women, because I am sure it is technically correct, but what on earth does it mean? The legislation has to be clear to those people who read it who are not lawyers, and the vast majority of Members of this House are not lawyers.

The language is not clear.

May I say to the Clerks of the House—the brilliant Clerks, who serve the House long hours into the night and with such enthusiasm—that I am enormously grateful to them for their patience personally with me and for their diligence and great wisdom in drafting new clause 70? The new clause puts in black and white a bold statement of the commitment to the Good Friday agreement and to the principles which I call in shorthand in the new clause “the Belfast principles”. Those are the principles enshrined in the Good Friday agreement.

For Northern Ireland Unionists, the Belfast principles include the constitutional guarantee, through the consent principle, that Northern Ireland remains part of the United Kingdom unless and until there is a border poll and the people of Northern Ireland, and only Northern Ireland, say otherwise. It is not in the gift of No. 10, thank goodness; it is not in the gift of Dublin; it is governed by the people of Northern Ireland in a border poll. The constitutional principle is guaranteed among the Belfast principles in the Good Friday agreement, and to the principles which I call in shorthand in the new clause “the Belfast principles”. Those are the principles enshrined in the Good Friday agreement.

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There are many other principles—I could go on—in that document, which is enormously important for people not just in Northern Ireland, but particularly in Northern Ireland. I stand here as a Unionist and I am proud to defend the Belfast agreement—the Good Friday agreement. I say that with great pride because I grew up, not in in some stately home but on a 50-acre farm west of the River Bann in County Tyrone, very close to what unfortunately became known as the “murder triangle” for the number of people, both Catholic and Protestant, who were murdered by the IRA and subsequently by loyalist paramilitaries as well. Our postman was murdered at the end of our lane. Many of our farming neighbours were attacked on their tractors, or went out to a shed and opened the door, and there was a booby trap that blew off their head or face. My late father made it to 92, but he had to attend innumerable funerals of our neighbours, both Catholic and Protestant.

There is no monopoly on pain and suffering—every single one of the DUP Members in this House, their families and neighbours, suffered as well—but likewise in County Tyrone in 1981, when we had a Conservative Government led by the late Margaret Thatcher, we had the hunger strikes, which unfortunately became the best recruiting agent the IRA did not have in 1981. Ten young men starved themselves to death—highly emotive within the Catholic community, the republican community, the nationalist community. They were the sons of neighbours of ours in County Tyrone. All communities suffered.

Many Members of this House will have no idea who Jack Hermon was, because they are all so young. My dear late husband, who died with Alzheimer’s nine years ago, was the longest serving Chief Constable of the Royal Ulster Constabulary. During the appalling terrorist campaign waged by the IRA and subsequently by the Provisional IRA, which morphed into something called the Real IRA, and by loyalists—do not forget the woe, the suffering, the grief that was caused by loyalist paramilitaries—he described his officers as extraordinary men and extraordinary women doing an extraordinary job, and they did. In Northern Ireland, with a population of 1.8 million, 302 RUC officers were murdered. That is an awful lot of dead police officers.

In the 10 years that Jack was Chief Constable, he had to attend almost 100 funerals, and that undoubtedly affected him, but I tell the House that when the Good Friday agreement was signed and I talked to him about the constitutional consequences of having Sinn Fein in the Executive, Jack listened to me patiently and then lifted one finger and said, “If it saves the life of one police officer, I’m voting for this.” Jack supported publicly the Good Friday agreement, the late Mo Mowlam and her efforts at that time.

The Good Friday agreement has brought all of us in Northern Ireland stability and peace, from which the whole of the UK has benefited, the Republic of Ireland has benefited, and—since we are talking about Brexit—the European Union has benefited. After all, the IRA placed bombs in Germany, Spain, Gibraltar and elsewhere. Underpinning the Good Friday agreement—the foundation for it—was the fact that the Republic of Ireland and the UK had joined the European Union on the same day, at the same time. It was the cornerstone, the foundation of the Good Friday agreement. Under the agreement, those born in Northern Ireland could choose to identify themselves as British or Irish, or indeed both, but they also regarded themselves as Europeans.

The border became virtually invisible where once we had had watchtowers, murders, security checks and unapproved roads. The roads had been cratered, so that someone going to school on the other side of the border, or to a community hall, or church, or chapel, had to get out of their car and tiptoe around on the uncratered part of the road. Those roads have been filled in again. We have normality in Northern Ireland, we have peace, and we undoubtedly have people alive today who would not otherwise be alive.

Let me say ever so loudly and strongly to senior members of the Conservative party that I do not want to hear them or see them on television talking about pushing ahead with no deal—“Let’s just move on with no deal.” It is an absolute nonsense. It is so reckless and so dangerous. The Home Secretary stood here yesterday and made a statement about counter-terrorism. Dissident republicans are active. They are dangerous and ruthless—utterly ruthless. If I had a child or grandchild choosing a career—I have no grandchildren, by the way; I have two children, both of whom have chosen careers other than politics, sadly, because we need leadership in Northern Ireland and young people to come into politics—I would not encourage them to join the UK Border Force or Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs in the event of no-deal Brexit, because inevitably we will have a hard border.

It must be a moral responsibility and duty on this Government to take care of all personnel, all officials, in HMRC, in the Police Service of Northern Ireland and in the UK Border Force. It is all very well and good to have talked about “taking back control” of our borders—that was a catchy refrain during the EU referendum—but I never could, and still cannot all these months later, get any clarity on how exactly we proposed to take back control. However, in the event of no deal, we would certainly face a hard border, and dissident republicans would regard Police Service of Northern Ireland and HMRC officers, and UK border officials, as legitimate targets. I do not want that on my conscience, and I do not believe for one moment that the Prime Minister or the Government want that either. I plead with senior Conservative party members to stop the nonsense of talking up no deal. The Home Secretary wisely described no deal as “unthinkable”, and it is. She may not be here, but I quote her anyway, because I agree with her and hold her in very high regard.

Why am I so committed to this issue? It is because half my life has been blighted by the troubles. I was not involved in politics when the Good Friday agreement was signed. I was not then a member of the Ulster Unionist party, of which David Trimble was leader. He and I had taught together in the law faculty of Queen’s University Belfast. If anybody cares to look, they will see that my specialism was EU law; that is another reason why I am so passionate about this subject. David Trimble, who was such a remarkable, courageous leader of the Ulster Unionist party, never quite liked or understood my interest in EU law, yet now he is in another place and is asked for his views on so much. He and I will never fall out, but we have always disagreed over the EU. My love for it continues.
I accept that Brexit will happen. We as the United Kingdom have to come out together, and the Prime Minister made that quite clear at Prime Minister’s questions today, but in doing so we cannot risk undermining all that has been gained through the Good Friday agreement—the lives that have been saved and the normality that we have had. That will carry on, but people in Northern Ireland are extremely nervous. There is one party, the Democratic Unionist party—and I am just describing, factually. DUP Members are colleagues and friends, though sometimes I wonder, given the tone of voice that they use towards me. Let us remember the history: a previous Conservative Government, led by Margaret Thatcher, caused such divisions, hurt, anger, rage and outrage in one part of the community in Northern Ireland—the republican nationalist community—and there was the way that the hunger strikes were handled. It is critical that the Conservative Government, who are supported by the DUP, bear in mind all the people of Northern Ireland, and that the DUP does not speak for or represent all of them.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I did not think it was worth it.

Lady Hermon: Well, that is very disappointing.

Nigel Dodds: Could the hon. Lady answer the question posed by the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), who asked whether she accepts, as he does, that it is a good idea to have regulatory convergence and common rules between Northern Ireland and the Republic? Could she give a straight answer to that, because many in Northern Ireland now view her as being on the side of the Dublin Government on these issues?

Lady Hermon: I thank the right hon. Gentleman so much for that. [Interruption.] Yes, what do you do in response to that?

Nigel Dodds: Answer!

Lady Hermon: I can hear. If the right hon. Gentleman gives me a chance, instead of chuntering a way, I might actually reply to him.

The Prime Minister, and yesterday the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, made it absolutely clear—at least this is what I understood by the Secretary of State’s statement—that it was always the intention of the Prime Minister and the Government to have the same regulatory alignment right across the United Kingdom. For the record, if the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) wants me to say this again, I am a Unionist. I am not in the pocket of, am not propping up, and have not spoken to, the Dublin Government, and I strongly resent the implication, in his question, that I am doing that.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The hon. Lady and I have got on very well since entering the House together—16 years and I think four months ago, as the Speaker might say. Does she agree that my right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) asked her a very specific question relating to what the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) said about convergence across the island of Ireland? In the few minutes that have elapsed since then, I have not heard an answer to it.

Lady Hermon: I am most grateful to the right hon. Gentleman—or the hon. Gentleman; I just promoted him. That is not what I understood, so there is no point in putting up a straw man for me to knock down. I understood that the proposal that the Prime Minister took with her to Brussels was always to have been that the entirety of the UK should have the same alignment. The Prime Minister is no one’s fool. She has made it quite clear that she will protect the integrity of the whole United Kingdom. She had already ruled out having a border down the Irish sea. I therefore believe and trust that when she went to Brussels, she had always planned that there would be convergence throughout
the United Kingdom, and that Northern Ireland would not be treated differently from the rest of the United Kingdom. That is the confidence that I have.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): The hon. Lady may share with me a certain amount of bemusement. There can be no question for me, as a Unionist, of a separate regulatory arrangement for Northern Ireland, permitting it to have regulatory equivalence or convergence with the Republic. Convergence either applies to all of us, or cannot apply at all. I have to say that all of us having regulatory convergence with the Republic, and indeed the rest of the EU, strikes me as a very good idea.

Lady Hermon: I am grateful to my right hon. and learned Friend. Even though he sits on the other side of the Chamber, I have always regarded him as a friend. He has just summed up how I feel. I will not stand here and criticise our Prime Minister—she is the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, and I believed that her stance when she went to Brussels on Monday was that the convergence would apply to all of the United Kingdom. I did not believe for one moment that she would cast Northern Ireland off somehow to a regulatory framework and convergence on the island of Ireland, and not with the rest of the United Kingdom.

Of course, I do not want Northern Ireland to be treated any differently from the rest of the United Kingdom. We are all coming out of the EU—sadly—on 29 March 2019. The referendum result in Northern Ireland was in favour of remaining, but the UK-wide result will be honoured. The Prime Minister has said that repeatedly. As we move towards that, I urge and encourage the Government to adopt, in some form of words, new clause 70, because the principles of the Good Friday agreement, which I and the other Members who have put their names to the new clause are proud to support, must be protected in black and white on the face of that Bill. That is the assurance I need from the Government this afternoon, otherwise I will test the face of that Bill. That is the assurance I need from the Prime Minister's words and the agreement she reached as being indicative of her intending to do any such thing. If she was, all I can say is that she will not long survive her party's views, which are unanimous on this matter, irrespective of whether Members most enthusiastically embraced Brexit or most vigorously sought to prevent it. We therefore need to park that on one side.

1.45 pm

The hon. Member for North Down is right that that raises a major challenge. There is no point in pretending that it can be magicked away by soft words. We must face up to the consequences of our adherence to the Good Friday agreement in the way in which Brexit unfolds and is done, and regulatory equivalence is one part of that. That said, I hope that when Ministers respond, the hon. Lady will get sufficient reassurance that the United Kingdom Government understand that very well. Unless I am being misled by my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Front Bench, I believe that they do. The problem will remain that that requires us, as we proceed with Brexit, from time to time to face up to some of the realities that it brings in a regulatory context. If we do not, we cannot fulfil our obligations under the Good Friday agreement. That is the reality check. The problem we have always had in our debates on this matter is that, too often, I hear comments that are mired in a fantasy vision of what people would like in an ideal world that bears no resemblance to the reality of our international obligations and our interdependence with our closest neighbours, one of which happens to be the Republic of Ireland, with which we are blessed to enjoy a good relationship.

If we keep those factors in mind, we will maintain what is best for our country and succeed in carrying out the highly risky operation of Brexit as well as we may. I thank the hon. Member for North Down for properly raising the Good Friday agreement in our debate this afternoon. I look forward to hearing from my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Front Bench a response that reaffirms that our commitment to the agreement and to maintaining collectively peace on the island of Ireland and good relations with one of our closest neighbours and trading partners is paramount in our approach to the problem.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I rise to speak in support of new clause 70 and amendment 174. I applaud the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) for her initiative in seeking to put the principles of the Belfast agreement on the face of the Bill and for a wonderful speech. I think that all of us who listened to her were moved by her memories of the Good Friday agreement and how much it changed life in Northern Ireland, about which the hon. Lady spoke so eloquently.

It is clear that the Brexit process is challenging in the context of maintaining those benefits. I regret that, during the referendum campaign last year, those of us who highlighted the consequences that could flow did not get as much register as we would have liked. In the cost-benefit analysis between staying in and leaving the EU, the Good Friday agreement was a factor that should have been taken into account properly, but I regret to say that some of the enthusiasts for our leaving the EU seem to have systematically ignored it.

However, we are where we are. It is clear that we will have to try to manage the Brexit process in a way that does not adversely impact on the Good Friday agreement. I listened carefully to DUP Members, and I can well understand that any suggestion that leaving the EU involves uncoupling Northern Ireland and putting it into a separate regulatory regime for the benefit of maintaining the Good Friday agreement, or regulatory equivalence with the Republic of Ireland, is a complete non-starter. It is totally unacceptable to me, and I did not understand the Prime Minister's words and the agreement she reached as being indicative of her intending to do any such thing. If she was, all I can say is that she will not long survive her party's views, which are unanimous on this matter, irrespective of whether Members most enthusiastically embraced Brexit or most vigorously sought to prevent it. We therefore need to park that on one side.
and it would be an appalling betrayal of the good work done by so many people in sometimes dangerous situations if that were not protected.

A huge range of legacy issues is being addressed, not least the higher rate of unemployment and the consequential effects for the coming generations. Having the principles nailed into the legislation helps to ensure that Ministers here take note of the needs of the communities of Northern Ireland.

It has been clear throughout the whole process since the triggering of article 50 that the Government and their Whitehall machine have had little, if any, time for the devolved Administrations or their opinions on how to proceed with negotiations, what the final outcome should look like or what kind of continued links with the EU we should aim for. The obvious exception, of course, is the leader of the DUP, who appears to have a veto on things. What a tangled mess an ill-judged election and a poor campaign created.

The importance of Northern Ireland having a border with Ireland that facilitates the continued trade and social interaction between the communities on either side cannot be overstated. Clearly, it is in the best interests of the communities there to continue within the customs union and single market, and why any politician, from Stormont or anywhere else, would want to destroy that relationship is beyond me, especially given that the people voted to remain in the EU.

There is a parallel issue, in that people who have been ripped out of the EU against their will should also receive whatever minor and insufficient recom pense is on offer, and that is where amendment 174 comes in. If there is no longer any EU membership, the Scottish Parliament should be able to amend the legislation handed down from the EU. The original imposition in the Scotland Act 1998 of a requirement to follow EU legislation was intended to ensure that the devolved Administration complied with EU law, and if that is no longer needed, the devolved Administration should have the right to change the law concerned. There is much more to be done to balance the devolution settlements properly after Brexit, but one small step would be accepting amendment 174.

Let me end by complimenting the hon. Member for North Down again on new clause 70.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I rise to speak in favour of new clause 70, and to make it clear that unless I hear some good reason why I should not vote for it, I shall do so, because I think it is eminently sensible. I think we are now reaching a point in all this when people have just got to be big and strong and brave and say that they will do what they believe is right, and put the interests of our country—the United Kingdom—before political allegiance and everything else. This is bigger and more important than anything else. We are embarking on a course of a magnitude that we have not seen for decades, and it is important that we get it right, not just for my generation but for my children and my grandchildren.

Like, I think, everyone else in this place, I was extremely moved by the wonderful and wise words of the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon), whom I am going to call my friend. I think I am about her age, and in one respect I am like her and unlike the young people whom she rightly identified. I say that with no disrespect, because it is good to see young people in this place, but they probably cannot believe what it was like during the period of the troubles.

I was fortunate—I was not living in Northern Ireland then, as the hon. Lady and other Members were—but I remember that time incredibly well. I remember the terrible bomb that exploded in Birmingham when I was a child. I remember that, almost every night, my television screen was filled with terrible pictures of brave soldiers and remarkable police officers who were putting themselves absolutely on the frontline, and were doing so in a unique way. They were not engaged in some terror in another country; this was happening on their doorstep. This was their community, and these were their people. What they went through was even worse than what soldiers in a foreign field go through, because those soldiers will eventually return home to their own country, but these brave men and women returned to homes that were literally around the corner. It was a truly dreadful time, and the terror did not just come from the IRA in all its various guises: it also came from some of the extreme protestant movements. And, of course, caught up in the horror were real human beings. I never thought that this would happen. I could not see, as a young woman, how we could ever reach the period that we have now reached, a period of peace in Northern Ireland.

When I was a defence Minister, I had the great pleasure of going to Northern Ireland myself. It was the first time I had ever been to—I was going to say Ulster, but to Northern Ireland. I was delighted to be there, and, if I may say so, particularly delighted to be there with the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), but one of the things that really troubled and appalled me was the fact that the military covenant, which applies throughout the rest of the United Kingdom, did not extend to Northern Ireland in the way that it should have. One of the young men whom I met there had lost a limb in Afghanistan. It was nothing to do with the troubles; he had fought for his country somewhere else. He was denied the treatment and services to which he was absolutely entitled, for no other reason than that he had served in the British Army. That was a symbol of the disharmony, the pure prejudice, that still existed in some quarters. Equally, however, much progress has been made.

As we heard from my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), Brexit reality is unfolding. People are now recognising the reality of what 17 million voted for. I am going to be frank about this: I made a compromise. I put aside my long-held belief that our future should lie in the European Union and voted against my conscience, and I have accepted that we are leaving the European Union. What saddens me is that others cannot compromise in the same way. There are still people “banging on about Europe” from a hard-line, ideological position: Notwithstanding the fact that we lost our majority in the general election, they are still banging on in that hard-line, hard-Brexit way, and it is not acceptable. Let me respectfully say to my right hon. and hon. Friends that if I can compromise, and if my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) can compromise and accept that we are leaving the European Union, they too must see compromise. They must drop the rhetoric and come and find a solution to the Brexit problem, which will undoubtedly be a nightmare unless people compromise.
That is why I will no longer vote against my conscience. I am going to go through the Lobby with the hon. Member for North Down because it is the right thing to do. We must put aside our political differences—and in some instances, such as mine, put aside our long-held views—and vote for what is right and best for our country.

Let me gently say to Ministers that it does not help when we are told that we will be leaving the customs union, and we will be leaving the single market; we have to find a compromise. I think that the Prime Minister moved towards that with the idea of “regulatory alignment”, which makes a lot of sense. People are coming together. A consensus is forming, and I think that the consensus neatly lies with the customs union. I do not care what we call it—regulatory alignment, and all the rest of it. I am not interested in terminology. All I am interested in is getting the right result, and the right result in Northern Ireland and Ireland is no hard border. How do we achieve that? Through the customs union. It is very simple, and it will win support.

The danger of what is happening is that we are not bringing the people of this divided country back together. The more people bang on with their rhetoric, the more alienated other people are becoming, especially younger people. I have said this before, and it is a bit of an old joke, but in my terms that means anyone under the age of 45. They are looking at this place and listening to these debates and arguments, and what they see and hear is a bunch of older grey-haired men who seem determined to decide their future in a way that is not beneficial to their interests. I have said that before, and I am sorry to say that I was proved right. I warned my party that those people would punish us at the ballot box, and on 8 June that is exactly what they did.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I agree with much of what the right hon. Member. I have said, and I commend what was said earlier by the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon). Does the right hon. Member agree that the Government need to recognise that if they are to take courage, it will be from the peoples of Northern Ireland who endorsed the Good Friday agreement on an 81% turnout and voted 71.2% in its favour, and that the Government should listen not to the ne-er-do-wells on the Back Benches of any political party but to the cross-party, cross-community roots in Northern Ireland?

Anna Soubry: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman, and I think that this is a good way for me to end my speech. The hon. Member for North Down said exactly the same: if the Good Friday agreement meant that one person’s life was saved, it was worth supporting. Northern Ireland is an example of how people can put aside rhetoric and long-held beliefs, and come together to secure a peaceful, prosperous future for all generations, including generations to come. That is what the Committee must do now: it must find the compromises and find the solutions so that we can come back together, get on with the rest of what we have to do, and deliver a Brexit that works for everyone.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the excellent speeches of the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), and of course the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon). I was not planning to speak at great length about new clause 70 and other issues this afternoon, but I was profoundly moved by what she said. I think she speaks for many people in Northern Ireland whom I know and love, and it is a shame that there are not more voices like hers calling for that moderation and focus on what really matters, which is peace and stability.

I shall speak to amendments 168, 169, 172, 173, 175, 176, 158 and 159 in my name and the names of cross-party colleagues, who I am delighted have chosen to support the amendments. I also want to make clear my support for new clause 70 and amendment 338 and to briefly comment on new clause 70.

The Good Friday agreement is the foundation of the peace process on the island of Ireland. Let us be clear—without it many more lives would have been lost and ruined, and we would not have seen the emergence of the new normality that has characterised both UK-Irish relations and Northern Ireland-Republic of Ireland relations in the past 20 years. Given the events of recent days, whatever our views on them might be, it is more important than ever that this amendment receives strong support. There is nothing in it that threatens the Government’s position to preserve and uphold the Good Friday agreement. It seeks not to change the Good Friday agreement, but to preserve it and to put it in the Bill. I am sure that many Members will make that clear today.

Mr Gregory Campbell: When indicating the substantial contribution and progress made in recent decades in Northern Ireland, I caution the hon. Gentleman and other Members against attributing that in total to the process that started in 1998. The ceasefires—among those who should not have started killing people in the first place—commenced in 1994, four years before the Belfast agreement. So a process of people converging, to use the in-phrase, in a very realistic way away from violence and towards embracing peace had begun long before the Belfast agreement. I say that merely to bring a note of historical accuracy to the debate, as we are in danger of rewriting the past, as many do in Northern Ireland.

Stephen Doughty: Indeed, many men and women of courage and conviction on all sides in that process pushed forward the need for peace and stability and an end to the violence and killings on all sides. I pay tribute to all of them, including some of the many fantastic individuals whose names we do not know; I think particularly of those in the Quaker community and others who worked behind the scenes so tirelessly to bring sides together. This is clearly a process over many years, and it is not yet fully resolved; there are still some who would seek to undermine that process, and that stability and peace.

This touches me as well. My family served in Northern Ireland in the British Army. Parts of my family originate from what is now the Republic and others from Northern Ireland itself—the Cassidys in my family came from Northern Ireland over to Kirkcudbrightshire in Scotland.
I have friends, too, in all parts of the island of Ireland. In fact, I travelled as a young member of the Welsh Labour party to a conference organised by an organisation called Encounter, which brought together young members of all the parties in all parts of the British Isles and the Republic of Ireland. Despite having those family connections and having heard the tales from those in my family who had served, I was utterly shocked and astounded to walk through the Falls and the Shankill roads, to see the peace lines and to hear the stories of those from all sides of the conflict whose lives had been so dramatically affected and who had lost loved ones. It is incumbent on all Members in all parts of the House to remember where we were, where we have come from and what remains to be done.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Speakers today, particularly the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon), the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) and my hon. Friend, have reminded us of how the troubles affected everyone in Northern Ireland. I visited Northern Ireland during those times. Brief mention has also been made, in particular by the hon. Member for North Down, of how the troubles affected us in this country. I was a child living in Birmingham when those bombs went off. My father was a magistrate and we had to look under the car every morning before getting into it to go to school. Of course, the Conservative party suffered the most appalling attack at its heart. The troubles affected us all—

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Lady is not making a speech; she is making an intervention, and there will be plenty of time for her to make a speech, with the full rhetoric, later. If she has a point to intervene on, will she do it very briefly, please?

Ruth Cadbury: My sincere apologies.

Does my hon. Friend agree that we were all affected by the troubles, and that this is an opportunity to remind the House that we cannot go back to those days? This debate is so important for that reason.

Stephen Doughty: I wholeheartedly agree, and who can forget the Warrington bombing, for example, and the many other tragic events that affected young and old and people from all walks of life, in mainland UK as well?

How extraordinary it is that we would even contemplate putting any of the progress that has been made at risk. It was particularly important to hear what the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield and the right hon. Member for Broxtowe said. This goes beyond party politics and wider issues that we will have disagreements on in this House. This is about stability, peace and the constitutional settlement, and, ultimately, respect for the will of the people on the island of Ireland about their future. It is about understanding where that lies. It is not about games that some might choose to play for other purposes around this whole Brexit process.

That also draws into stark relief the role the EU has played in being a force around peace processes and stability, and not just in the UK. I do not claim that the EU was responsible for all the progress in Northern Ireland. I do not claim anything of that nature, but we have seen the role it has played in preventing a further outbreak of violence in Cyprus and in encouraging countries and different communities to come together in the Balkans. This was substantially lost from the debate we had around the referendum. Our coming together in Europe around shared values, peace and stability has helped to bring people together.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I am listening very carefully to what the hon. Gentleman is saying. Of course none of us here—heaven forbid—would use this situation to do impure things like politics, but does he agree that there are those who would seek to manipulate the current situation for other goals? I am thinking in particular of the French intention to take business from the City of London and of some—I emphasise some—in Dublin who perhaps see an advantage in the current situation, which has led to a lot of discomfort on the island of Ireland.

Stephen Doughty: We are not here to talk about France’s intentions as regards the City of London; we are here to talk about the constitutional settlement in these islands, and I cannot understand why the Government would not want to accept new clause 70, given that it clearly sets out an agreement that they as a Government are committed to. I certainly will proudly go through the Lobby, or happily act as a Teller for the hon. Member for North Down later to make sure that that vote goes forward.

I shall now move on to other amendments, relating to clause 10 and schedule 2, tabled in my name and those of Members of other parties, regarding Wales and Scotland, the wider devolution context and the constitutional settlement we have. Clause 10 gives effect to schedule 2 and sets out the power of the devolved authorities to correct deficiencies in domestic devolved legislation that arise from withdrawal from the EU and to remedy potential breaches. Those infamous Henry VIII powers are included in those provisions. Using those powers, devolved Ministers would be able to modify retained EU law to correct those deficiencies and to act in various ways to deal with the circumstances of leaving. The crucial point, however, is that the same powers are given concurrently to UK Ministers in areas where devolved competence is absolutely clear, and those Ministers are free from the scrutiny of the devolved legislatures.

UK Ministers have been given the exclusive power to amend retained direct EU legislation—that which comes from EU regulations rather than from directives—which covers otherwise devolved competences, as we discussed at great length the other day. There is therefore a significant inequality in the powers that have been given to Ministers. I am delighted that those on the Labour Front Bench and others are opposed to that, as are Welsh Labour and many others from across the parties. Our amendments seek to address that issue. The Welsh Government have argued:

“Direct EU legislation (such as EU regulations) can only be amended by a Minister of the Crown, and would fall to be scrutinised by Parliament even if the subject was one that was devolved to the Assembly.”

When we discussed the amendments the other day, I was disappointed by the response from the Minister. Despite the assurances that we had had from the Secretary...
of State for Scotland when he appeared before the Scottish Affairs Committee, and despite other commitments that had been made about respecting reasonable and constructive amendments tabled by the devolved Governments, there was no willingness to take on board any of the amendments. We had no commitments on them, which was extremely disappointing.

The amendments are not about wrecking the Brexit Bill or about stopping the process. We all have different views on where we should go, but the amendments are about ensuring that we continue to have a stable and effective constitutional settlement and do not suddenly start grabbing back powers or giving UK Ministers new powers to interfere in areas that have long since been devolved. Let us not forget that it is almost 20 years since the advent of the first devolution Acts.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): The hon. Gentleman refers to the importance of having stability. Does he also think it important to have legal certainty, and therefore to have mechanisms to ensure that our laws work well and quickly as soon as Brexit happens?

Stephen Doughty: Indeed, but why did the Government reject the amendments that we tabled on putting the Joint Ministerial Committee on a statutory footing and on establishing framework-making powers? Many of those amendments would indeed have provided legal stability. The hon. and learned Lady surely knows that many of the legal powers in these areas are devolved in relation to both Executive and legislative competence. I am sorry to say that the attitude of UK Government Ministers has worsened in the last few days. The Brexit Secretary yesterday described the Welsh First Minister and the Scottish First Minister as “foolish”. That is hardly the attitude that we expect, especially when Ministers keep telling us that we are in a relationship of respect.

2.15 pm

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Would the hon. Gentleman agree, however, that Ministers in the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament have called UK Ministers of the Crown far worse things than “foolish”?

Stephen Doughty: I am speaking about the context of these negotiations. Lots of things get said in all the legislatures of the UK that I am sure some of us would perhaps not say at certain times, but we are talking about a serious set of negotiations.

I have taken assurances from Ministers in good faith about the nature of those negotiations, only to hear another part of the UK Government saying something quite different. The Bill as it stands is highly deficient. Many Scottish Conservative Members were very clear about the deficiencies in clause 11 the other day. They were very unhappy with those provisions. I urge the Government, in line with what the Secretary of State for Scotland has said, to look carefully at these amendments and to accept some of them. Otherwise, I warn them again that there will be serious problems with the Bill on Report and when it reaches the other place in relation to the legislative consent motions. The Secretary of State for Scotland told the Scottish Affairs Committee in October:

“As a UK Government, we are discussing those amendments with the respective Governments to understand fully what is sought to be achieved...It may be that some amendments can be accepted with a little bit of modification...it is ultimately for this House to determine whether amendments are successful in relation to the Bill.”

However, we have yet to see any movement so far from Ministers on these amendments. I want to turn to two important amendments tabled in my name and those of my colleagues. They are grouped for debate today, which makes perfect sense, but I understand that we will not vote on them until a later date. Amendments 158 and 159 get to the heart of the matter. The constitutional settlement relating to Wales and Scotland is governed by the various Wales and Scotland Acts. One of the big issues that was trumpeted in the Wales Act 2017—I am sure that the same was true of the various Scotland Acts—was the permanence of the constitutional arrangements, the permanence of the Welsh and Scottish Governments and their legislatures, and the permanence of their legislation, yet powers are now being granted in this Bill to amend the very Wales and Scotland Acts that form the basic constitutional building blocks of the devolution settlement. That is why amendments 158 and 159 are so important. Amendment 158 would prevent the powers of a Minister of the Crown, under clause 7 of the Bill, from being exercised to amend the Scotland Act 1998 or the Government of Wales Act 2006. Amendment 159 relates to international obligations but essentially does the same thing.

The Secretary of State for Wales stated on Third Reading of the Wales Bill—now the Wales Act 2017—in September last year:

“The Bill meets the commitments in the St Davids Day agreement. It delivers a devolution settlement for Wales that is clearer, fairer and stronger, and it...delivers a historic package of powers to the National Assembly that will transform it into a fully fledged Welsh legislature, affirmed as a permanent part of the United Kingdom’s constitutional fabric, enhancing and clarifying the considerable powers it currently has.”

He also said that that Bill introduced the reserved powers model, yet we saw on Monday how that model is now being undermined by moving to a conferred powers model again. He went on to say:

“As part of the clear boundary of devolved and reserved matters...the Bill draws a clear line between those public bodies that are the responsibility of Welsh Ministers and the Assembly, and those that are the responsibility of the UK Government and Parliament.”

He said that the Wales Bill would draw “a line under the constant squabbles over where powers lie”.—[Official Report, 12 September 2016; Vol. 614, c. 727.]

I therefore find it extraordinary that, at this stage in the negotiations, we have a Bill that will give UK Ministers the power to undermine that permanency of settlement and blur the lines between what is devolved and what is not, which will undoubtedly lead to further expensive squabbles in the Supreme Court and elsewhere about where the powers lie. I cannot understand why the Bill has been drafted in this way, despite the repeated concerns that have been expressed by the Welsh and Scottish Governments and others about the Bill as it is framed. I cannot understand how we got to this stage,
without finding a solution to this issue. I will certainly want to press amendment 158, and potentially amendment 159, to a vote at the appropriate point, because they go to the heart of this group of amendments.

Lucy Frazer: It is really important that all the devolved Administrations retain powers, and it has been said that they will actually increase their powers, which overall would be a good thing. The hon. Gentleman has stated, however, that there will be a reduction in powers for Wales. Does he accept that that cannot be the case in circumstances where it is stated for all the devolved Administrations and all the devolution Acts that the UK Parliament has the power to change the laws of the devolved Administrations? Therefore, as a matter of law, the UK Parliament already has the power—under section 28 of the Scotland Act 1998, section 107 of the law, the UK Parliament already has the power—under section 28 of the Scotland Act 1998, section 107 of the Wales Act 2006 and section 5 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998—to change the laws of those devolved Administrations.

Stephen Doughty: I would gently say to the hon. and learned Lady that I do not think she fully understands the legislation or the devolution settlement. The big point that was made by the Secretary of State for Wales in the passing of the Wales Act 2017 was about the permanency of the Assembly and the Welsh Government and their powers and responsibilities. This Bill undermines all that. It opens up a back door to allow the UK Government to amend, by Executive fiat, the very legislation that establishes the Welsh and Scottish Governments and the two legislatures. That is an extraordinary situation, and it should not be the case.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I agree with the thrust of the hon. Gentleman’s argument, but in relation to a point made earlier, why would anyone in this House ever give powers to or take back powers from the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly or the Northern Ireland Assembly without the proper scrutiny of this Chamber?

Stephen Doughty: Indeed. I might have taken some Ministers at their word in the past, but there are others who would love to take back powers or to act without reference either to this Chamber or to the Chambers of the devolved legislatures, as we have seen on a whole series of issues. Ultimately we would end up in the Supreme Court, wasting lots of taxpayers’ money and in dispute. That cannot be the way to keep stability in the constitutional settlement.

My amendments are in no way intended to wreck the Bill or to undermine the process that the Government have set out, but they are absolutely essential to maintaining a stable settlement with Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The events of the past 36 hours have shown why the Government have simply not paid enough serious attention to the unintended consequences of their various grand rhetorical statements. I will therefore seek to press amendment 158 to a vote at the appropriate time.

Mr Kenneth Clarke: It seems to me that the Brexit negotiations have finally started to reach a serious stage over the past two or three days. It is rather unfortunate that it is now 18 months since we held the referendum and more than six months since we invoked article 50, but we are still at the stage, which the British Government agreed to, of discussing the three preliminary points, based on our withdrawal, before we can get to discuss our new trade arrangements.

In my opinion, the rights of EU citizens could have been settled in five minutes, with a mutual recognition allowing British people who have moved to the continent and EU citizens who have moved here to retain the rights they expected to have when they made that important move. The financial arrangements should have taken about half an hour, because it was perfectly obvious that there would be financial obligations. We would not have known what the obligations were until we had concluded the negotiations, but the heads of agreement—the basis upon which the mathematics could eventually be done—should not have taken very long. The difficulties were political, and they were here in British politics and in the Conservative party. That delayed progress for a long time.

It is the extremely important Irish question that has posed the first really big issue that has to be solved properly. The hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) made an extremely eloquent and moving speech—I will not attempt to rival it. Like her, I certainly remember the Irish troubles. I lived in Birmingham at the time when there were serious bomb attacks there. My first visit to Northern Ireland was with other Conservative MPs. We caused the security people a little consternation by entering a no-go area in Derry with John Hume, who I think had got us a laissez-passer from the IRA so that we could get in and see the conditions there. More seriously, several MPs were killed. I knew Airey Neave and the Rev. Robert Bradford, and Ian Gow was a good friend of mine.

The hon. Lady put it eloquently and movingly. I hope that nobody in this country still underestimates the huge achievement that the Good Friday agreement represents, or indeed the huge achievement it represents that Northern Irish politicians of all complexions have turned it into such a success, making Northern Ireland a more cohesive and peace-loving society, because nobody wants to return to anything resembling the troubles.

We agreed to address the Irish border problem as a preliminary issue, but nobody seemed to pay it any serious attention until about a week ago. Certainly, it was scarcely mentioned in our rather agitated British debate in this country. It was thought a rather odd feature that the Irish Government had somehow persuaded the other members to raise it with us. But the effect on the Irish border of our leaving the European Union is of immense significance, for all the reasons we have now been stressing.

I thought that the Government’s policy on the border was slightly ludicrous. They keep saying that they are committed to an open border, and that is absolutely right and consistent with the Good Friday agreement. They then say that we are leaving the single market and the customs union. I have said many times in the House that those two outcomes are completely incompatible; the two together are an oxymoron—I think that is the correct phrase—because we cannot have one with the other.

I thought that at last the light had dawned and that the Prime Minister had moved in her discussions with the Taoiseach and reached an agreement. Despite the assertions she had been giving all the way through,
but consistent with them—obviously she would say—she had agreed on behalf of the Government, and no doubt believed that she would get the approval of this House, to have regulatory convergence, in certain areas at least, across the border. I, like my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), took that to mean the whole United Kingdom, because we cannot have separate arrangements in Ireland.

At last common sense was dawning. I thought, because, whatever we call it, we cannot have any trade agreement with any other country in modern times unless we have agreed to mutually binding arrangements for regulatory and customs convergence—either harmonisation or mutual recognition in set areas. We will not get a trade agreement with Samoa—I think the Secretary of State has just headed there to make exploratory noises—if we tell them that we are not going to agree to any binding regulations or rules that will be mutually acceptable in whatever goods and services we trade.

That satisfied me, but then came this bewildering veto.

Mr Gregory Campbell: I am glad that the right hon. and learned Gentleman has returned to the veto, because vetoes have been mentioned several times in the debate thus far. Does he agree that what has been thoroughly unhelpful in the past 10 days is the arrival of Donald Tusk in Dublin, in effect to hand the Irish Taoiseach a veto by saying, “We in Europe stand with you, and whatever you want, we will back you.”?

Mr Clarke: That is hardly surprising. I do not think that Donald Tusk would go to any of the other 27 member states without saying that he accepts that their consent is required, and in this case, in particular, the Government of the Republic of Ireland have to be party to any agreement.

That seemed to be addressed by the fact that our Prime Minister was able to reach an agreement with the Taoiseach on regulatory arrangements—the precise details would have to await the ultimate free trade deal—in order to obviate any necessity for a closed border. I hope that the reason the DUP vetoed it was not that it was tempted by the idea of going back to border posts and controls; I do not think that the DUP is any more in favour of that than any other Member who has spoken in this House. I hope that it was sheer incompetence that the DUP had not been shown the text or kept party to the negotiations.

I will go no further than this, but I find it absolutely astonishing, if we are moving on to this issue, that the closest possible relationship would not be maintained with the devolved Government in Belfast. Had I been a member of the Government in Belfast—a highly unlikely prospect—I would have been rather indignant at not being closely consulted, and I certainly would have wanted to know what the terms were likely to be rather well in advance. If that is the explanation—the expression of the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) gives the impression that might have quite a lot to do with it—I hope that the devolved Government will share with us all the importance of getting this right and maintaining the Belfast agreement and will therefore lift this veto, reach some understandings and let it proceed.

That brings me to the amendments. I think the negotiations are likely to succeed in the end. I take an optimistic view because, on both sides of the channel, an overwhelming number of politicians and officials are perfectly sensible people. On the whole, the ones involved in the negotiations have a better understanding of what we are talking about than the average citizen. They all realise that the public interest in every one of the 28 countries is in reaching a sensible agreement that minimises the damage and maintains, as far as possible, the freedoms of trade and movement.

2.30 pm

What has always worried me, particularly in the light of the pathetically slow progress so far, is that, despite the good will on both sides, it will all collapse by accident and we will suddenly find we have no deal because the parties have contrived to put themselves into a deadlock from which they can no longer get out or because events have put them into a deadlock situation and it suddenly stops. This week, on a serious subject, was the first indication that that could happen. If the DUP feels indignant about the fact that it was not properly involved, I hope it will put the larger interest ahead of other things and decide that, after a bit of consultation and with some reassurances, it is probably okay and that there will be some regulatory and customs convergence across both sides of the border.

I think I was misunderstood by the Westminster leader of the DUP, the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds), in his brief intervention earlier. I share the view that these arrangements have to be United Kingdom arrangements. What is necessary to preserve the free border in Ireland has to be, if necessary, put in place and replicated in every other part of the United Kingdom. The Irish border is such an important question because, in many ways, it will determine what arrangements we have and, in my opinion, it will move us in the highly desirable direction of some regulatory and customs convergence in our future trading arrangements.

With any luck we have had a near miss and, in the next few weeks, we will at last be able to begin the serious negotiations on future trade arrangements. This mishap underlines the case for accepting new clause 70 for the avoidance of future doubt and to avoid future accidents. As we are all totally agreed on what an agreement that minimises the damage and maintains, as far as possible, the freedoms of trade and movement.

I see that the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), is replying for the Government. If I may say so, he always draws the short straw. When it is a little difficult to see quite what the Government will say in answer to the questions they face, they turn, as ever, to him. At this moment I cannot see what on earth he can say to reject this amendment. I cannot see why acknowledging the Belfast agreement poses any difficulty for the Government. Perhaps, at last, he has the pleasant task of standing up to say there is absolutely no reason why the Committee cannot accept the amendment. It is the policy of this Government, as it is the policy of every other party in this House, to be firmly committed
Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): It is always a mixed blessing to speak after the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke). Mixed because, obviously, I agree with much of what he says but could never possibly match the way in which he says it.

I begin by addressing amendment 167 and the other amendments in my name and in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford). I would like to bring both sides of the Committee together by taking the opportunity to wish Finland a happy 100th birthday today, and to wish all Finns in the UK and around the world a happy 100th independence day. Finland, of course, is a fully sovereign and independent nation, and a member state of the European Union to boot, demonstrating that the two are entirely compatible. Once again, the Finns are a lesson for us all. As a historical footnote, Finland declared independence at a time of political mayhem in the state from which it seceded—there are always lessons from history.

Today’s debate is set among the chaos of the Prime Minister’s inability to get a deal on Monday. We were promised a coalition of chaos after the general election, which is one promise the Prime Minister has been able to keep.

The hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) made an extraordinarily powerful speech in moving new clause 70. I hope that all Members, even those who may not agree with her, listened closely to what she had to say—we listened, and other Members did, too. The new clause seeks to preserve the principles of the Good Friday agreement. Years of hard work have gone into peace in Northern Ireland, as noted in the powerful speeches by Members on both sides of the Committee. I hope colleagues from Northern Ireland will not mind, but it would be remiss of me not to mention that the St Andrews agreement, which was part of that process, was signed in my constituency. Some hon. Members were there at the time.

Given the precious goal of long-term peace in Northern Ireland, it is astonishing that this Bill fails to address the issue, and that even in Committee we are having to remind the Government of their responsibilities. That reflects the Bill’s wider issues on the devolved Administrations. The previous Member for Moray, Angus Robertson, rightly raised the problems of the Irish border earlier this year, and the Prime Minister told Angus, just as Vote Leave told us, that there was nothing to worry about. I bet the Prime Minister wishes she had listened to Mr Robertson—there was plenty to listen to.

Mr Robertson was not alone. The Committee on Exiting the European Union noted in its report published last week—I hope members of that Committee will not mind my quoting it—that it is not possible to see how leaving the customs union is reconcilable with the imposition of a border, and it concludes:

“In the light of the recent statement from the Irish Government about the border, Ministers should now set out in more detail how they plan to meet their objective to avoid the imposition of a border, including if no withdrawal agreement is reached by 29 March 2019.”

The Minister will be keen to tackle that when he speaks shortly.

The Prime Minister travelled to Brussels on Monday to discuss a deal on regulatory alignment. It is not for me to comment on when other Members may or may not have seen the detail and on what discussions were had—I am sure hon. Members will take the opportunity to comment themselves—but SNP Members think that regulatory alignment is quite a good approach. The Scottish Government first proposed such a resolution about a year ago in “Scotland’s Place in Europe”. It is also notable that in that publication we took on board the views of other political parties and experts—we are okay with listening to experts on the issue of Europe. The Government would do well to listen.

Of course, we believe that remaining in the single market would make it a lot easier for the UK Government to give certainty to business and the economy, and it would also be helpful on Northern Ireland. Yesterday Peter Hain, a former Labour Member, called on the Prime Minister to keep the whole UK in the single market and the customs union in order to avoid “sacrificing” the Good Friday agreement. We in the SNP obviously wholeheartedly agree with him. We recognise the historic and constitutional importance of the Good Friday agreement, and we will vote to protect it tonight if the hon. Member for North Down presses new clause 70 to a vote.

I pay tribute to the hon. Lady’s tireless efforts. There are areas on which she often disagrees with us and with many Members of the House, but there are inherent dangers if this Government only take on board the views of the DUP. They should, of course, take on board the DUP’s views, but they should also take on board those of all political parties, and I pay tribute to the hon. Lady’s efforts to ensure there is the strongest possible voice for everybody in Northern Ireland. That might sometimes make for uncomfortable listening for me and for others across this House, but it is extraordinarily important, and I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for doing this.

I turn to the amendments standing in my name—amendments 166, 167, 170, 171 and 174. Some of these points have been raised by the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty). Amendments 166 and 167 were put together by the Scottish and Welsh Governments, and confer further powers to legislate and give Scottish Ministers the ability to make their own amendments to the directly applicable EU law. The ability of Scottish Ministers to have these powers is vital for the proper functioning of the Scottish Parliament and it also keeps consistency of law where we have different legal systems across.


Stephen Gethins: I see the hon. Gentleman shaking his head, but of course this is not just my view; it is shared by other Members and by the Law Society of Scotland. Amendment 167 gives Scottish Ministers the ability to make a different change in Scotland, where Scotland’s circumstances require it. After all, that was the entire point of having a devolution settlement in the first place. Preparing our laws for exiting the EU will be
technical, but it will require significant policy choices, such as those in environmental areas, where organisations such as the Scottish Environment Protection Agency will co-operate with its counterparts in Brussels directly. That brings me to another point, which I am sure the Minister will deal with. One matter we will have to address in readiness for exit is who should replace the EU regulators within the UK—we are not entirely clear on that. This might be technical but it is extraordinarily important, and I am sure the Minister will pick up on it.

Amendment 167 expresses deep concern from the devolved Administrations that if only UK Ministers have the ability to make fixes in EU regulations, the UK Government could subsume powers coming back from Brussels and act as regulator for the whole of the UK in relation to an area of devolved policy, such as environmental standards. Again, that is incredibly important.

Amendments 170, 171 and 174 aim to ensure that devolved Ministers should have the same powers in respect of matters falling within devolved competences as UK Ministers are being given in clauses 8 and 9. As the Bill stands, if the need arose to deal with a power to make subordinate legislation in a devolved area, the Bill would require Scottish or Welsh Ministers to go to the UK Government to ask permission for them to do it on their behalf. That is clearly not acceptable to the devolved Administrations and to Members across this House. Amendment 170 would lift this unnecessary restriction on devolved Ministers’ powers. It would equalise the powers between the UK Government and devolved Administrations, giving each their proper role on reserved and devolved laws.

**Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con) rose—**

**Stephen Gethins**: To give everybody a little break, I shall give way to the right hon. Gentleman.

**Sir Desmond Swayne**: Given the thrust of the hon. Gentleman’s amendments, has it occurred to him that these powers were ceded to the EU in order to maintain an integrity of the internal market? Equally, when these powers return to the UK, there will be a need, in the interests of many Scottish businesses, to maintain the integrity of the UK market, which is of vital importance to the Kingdom of Scotland.

**Stephen Gethins**: I have many face-palm moments when it comes to Tory Brexiteers and that was another one. To compare the internal market of the EU, with its independent member states, with that of the United Kingdom is astonishing and it demonstrates the lack of understanding of the EU that lay at the heart of vote leave and continues to lie at the heart of these arguments. It also misunderstands the state of the United Kingdom now. It is not the same state as it was 40 years ago. Devolution, whether one agrees with it or not, and I know that many Conservative Members would rather we did not have devolution, has changed the framework in which the United Kingdom exists. The right hon. Gentleman makes the point: we must have these powers devolved to the Scottish Parliament to make them work.

**Anna Soubry**: The hon. Gentleman and I agree on many of these matters, but I have to take him up on this point. It is not on to say that Conservative Members do not agree with devolution. Let us be clear that we do, which is why we happily voted for an Act—I believe in the last Parliament—that conveyed even more powers of devolution to the Scottish Parliament.

**Stephen Gethins**: I thank the right hon. Lady for her point, but I should make it clear that I said that some Conservative Members have perhaps not come to terms with the devolved Administrations. [Interruption.] If Ministers have come to grips with it and believe in devolution, and believe it should exist within a devolved settlement, they will back our amendments. If they do that, they will be able to prove me wrong in my point. I look forward to their backing our amendments and doing that later on today.

**Sir Desmond Swayne**: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Stephen Gethins**: Not at the moment. I want to move on and there is plenty to go through.

The Bill gives UK, Scottish and Welsh Ministers the power to make instruments needed to ensure that our laws are still compliant with our international treaty obligations when we leave the EU. However, the Bill, as drafted, means that, unlike the UK Ministers, devolved government cannot use this power to amend directly applicable EU laws—amendment 171 aims to rectify that. Of course, the Minister will be backing that.

Amendment 174 is equally important. In fact, it would be good to understand exactly what is going on with the UK Government’s position on this matter. The Bill gives UK, Scottish and Welsh Ministers the power to make instruments needed to implement the withdrawal agreement. However, unlike the UK Ministers, devolved Administrations cannot use this power to amend directly applicable EU laws—and this amendment would rectify that anomaly, too.

Leaving the power restriction aside, the UK Government have planned to introduce separate primary legislation on the withdrawal agreement. What purpose, then, does clause 9 actually serve? And will the Minister explain how this restriction on devolved Administrations can exist, given that there will be a separate piece of legislation to give effect to the withdrawal agreement? These amendments were not drawn together just by the SNP; they drew support from across this House. If Members do not mind my saying so, that was not the most important part of this; the most important part was Scottish and Welsh Government officials sitting down together—this is not always easy—with SNP and Labour colleagues, and Plaid Cymru colleagues in Wales having significant input, too, to pull these amendments together. I hope the Minister will give them serious thought. I do not want to leave the EU, but this is a way of compromise. The right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) may disagree with me on some things, but we agree that we are both willing to compromise on this, and the Minister needs to look at it. If he is seriously about the devolved Administrations still working after we leave, I urge him to examine these amendments.

I turn to the devolved delegated powers. A lot of discussion and consultation has gone on in Holyrood
on the subject, and I know that Liberal Democrat, Labour and Green Members, and others, have raised this. A lot of discussion and consultation has gone on with Scottish Ministers and members of other political parties to try to reach some consensus. On difficult issues such as this that is a good way of trying to reach out, and I commend Scottish Ministers for having done that. I also commend Opposition politicians in the Scottish Parliament for having sat down and tried to reach an agreement on this, as that was a responsible thing to do. Once again, the devolved Administrations are leading, where Westminster should perhaps follow.

As a result of that, the Scottish Government are committed to working with the Scottish Parliament and its Committees to agree a set of principles and a process that will ensure that the instruments that are made under the Bill receive the appropriate scrutiny. We hope that the UK Government will do the same for the UK Parliament, and we on these Benches look forward to those discussions. Again, I wonder whether the Minister can tell us what plans he has to reach a consensus across this House.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Is this not one of the key differences? I refer to the undertakings the Scottish Government have given about how they will use the delegated powers that we are seeking through these amendments, as opposed to the naked power grab, through the Henry VIII clauses in this Bill, which we will come to on another day, by the UK Government.

Stephen Gethins: My hon. Friend makes a good point about the power grab, but of course Government Members do have the opportunity to prove us wrong and back the amendments that have been drawn together in a cross-party way. I very much look forward to doing so.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): We are speaking about a power grab. Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that the power grab the SNP wants is for Scotland to become independent and then give all these powers that he wants back in Scotland straight back to the EU?

Stephen Gethins: Today is the day Finland celebrates its 100th birthday as an independent sovereign state, and it has no problem with full membership of the European Union and with the sovereignty that comes with it. I concede that sharing sovereignty is sometimes okay. Some Conservative Back Benchers, including the hon. Gentleman, may not agree with that, but sharing sovereignty in some areas with the EU is a good thing: on areas such as trade and the environment, there are benefits for his constituency as much as for mine. Such areas are crucial and we do not have a problem with sharing sovereignty on them. For instance, we would have our own say when fishing becomes a political priority in a way it never was for the United Kingdom Government.

Sir Desmond Swayne: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen Gethins: No. I am going to move on, but I would like to see the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) table some amendments. The Secretary of State for Scotland said in questions earlier that there will be amendments. I accept that Scottish Conservative Members have their misgivings, and they have made some valuable points, but I was disappointed that they have not tabled any amendments themselves. That was remiss of them, especially at a time when we are able to work on a cross-party basis.

I shall move on, because there is quite a lot of technical stuff to consider. The SNP has tabled a series of amendments in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber that would delete the word “appropriate” and insert the word “necessary”. This is relevant to the discussion on delegated powers. The recommendation came not from the SNP or Labour, or even from the Liberal Democrats or anybody else, but from the Law Society of Scotland. We have been happy to work with external stakeholders who, I concede, know a great deal more about this stuff than I do. I am always happy to take guidance and advice on these issues, and I recommend that all Members think about doing so.

The need to rein in the meaning of the word “appropriate” was first highlighted by the House of Lords Constitution Committee, which published its report on the great repeal Bill and delegated powers back in March. That report gave credence to amending the legislation, with particular attention to the use of the word “appropriate”. The House of Lords Committee suggested that “a general provision be placed on the face of the Bill to the effect that the delegated powers granted by the Bill should be used only...so far as necessary to adapt the body of EU law to fit the UK’s domestic legal framework; and...so far as necessary to implement the result of the UK’s negotiations with the EU.”

Our consequential amendments 209, 210, 212, 213, 214, 215 take into account those recommendations.

I welcome the amendments tabled by the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), who I believe is seeking to achieve with them an outcome similar to what SNP Members seek. There are outstanding concerns about how in practice powers excluded from Scottish Ministers may work. A number of private international law instruments may need specifically Scottish adaptations, given the separateness of Scots law and the Scottish judiciary. It is clear that this Bill needs to be significantly amended. When senior legal experts are speaking out on almost every single clause, we have to wonder whether we should continue with the Bill or just start again from scratch, but we are where we are with this. I hope that Ministers will take on board the amendments that come not just from political parties but from across the board.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): The hon. Gentleman should be in no doubt that amendments cannot be a Trojan horse and they cannot frustrate the democratic will of the people of the United Kingdom. The question is really simple: does he accept that the Bill is necessary, and that it is largely procedural?

Stephen Gethins: It should not be incumbent on any Member of Parliament to pass any old law that the Government want us to pass. If this place does not believe that the Bill is fit for purpose, we have a responsibility to interrogate it. I suggest to the hon. Gentleman that he is allowed to make amendments. That is something that he, as an MP, can do. There are hundreds of amendments, many of them tabled by Opposition Members but some tabled by Government Members. I hope that,
in due course, Scottish Conservative Members will start to table amendments to Bills, because that is something an MP is allowed to do and I encourage them to do it. If we do not think that a Bill is fit for purpose, we will not vote for it, and I would not expect any other Member to do otherwise.

I pay particular tribute to the Scottish and Welsh officials who have worked so hard on this legislation over the past few months. Often, when we discuss amendments in Parliament we are doing so at the end of a process, but there are officials in the devolved Administrations and elsewhere working extraordinarily hard on this. The Secretary of State for Scotland said earlier that he will table amendments—at 500-plus days on from the EU referendum, I am glad to hear that—so will the Minister tell us when those amendments will be tabled?

On a historical note, I noticed earlier that Brexiteers were hailing Henry VIII as a great Brexiteer. Henry VIII was never King of Scots, but he was responsible for the rough wooing of Scotland.

Stephen Doughty: I am not going to woo the hon. Gentleman, but I thank him for giving way. Of course, Henry VIII and the Tudors originate from Wales—I am sure he knows about Tudor/Tudur and all the connections there. Given that we heard the Secretary of State for Scotland talking about amendments to clause 11, if we do not get the necessary changes to clause 10, would the hon. Gentleman welcome votes on amendments 158 and, possibly, 159, which I have tabled, to make sure that the Government cannot just amend the Scotland and Wales Acts willy-nilly?

Stephen Gethins: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman made what will be, I am afraid, the final intervention, because he makes an excellent point. I agree with him wholeheartedly and thank him for bringing that up. Henry VIII’s Welshness does not excuse the rough wooing, and nor does it excuse the Henry VIII powers taken in the Bill. We have to learn from history and we have to learn from bad legislation. Significant amendments need to be made because the Bill is not fit for purpose as it stands. I look forward to an extensive speech from the Minister in which he addresses the many points that have been made. Should the hon. Member for North Down wish to press her new clause to a vote, we stand ready to support her.

Douglas Ross: Thank you, Mr Streeter, for calling me to speak. I have sat through several of the Committee’s debates so far, but have only been able to intervene. This is the first time I have had the chance to make a speech and give my take on the amendments before us.

I feel fortunate to have been in the Chamber to listen to the speech by the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon). We share something in common in that my wife is a police officer—just a sergeant in Keith, I have to say; not quite at the level reached by the hon. Lady’s husband. When she spoke about the troubles in Northern Ireland and the efforts her late husband went to with so many colleagues, it touched a raw nerve for those of us who are so closely connected with our police, fire and ambulance services and the sacrifices they still make on a daily basis to protect us.

I listened carefully to what the hon. Lady said about new clause 70. It is useful that we have had this opportunity to discuss the Belfast agreement, because although she gave a thoughtful and moving speech, I hope she accepts that nothing with respect to our departure from the European Union and, indeed, nothing in the Bill, will compromise the Belfast agreement. Her words were very useful in giving us an opportunity to discuss and debate this issue, but I am not sure it is necessary for us to support new clause 70, because there is already clear information to show that the Belfast agreement is secure.

Lady Hermon: The Good Friday agreement created cross-border institutions and policies that have been supported and, indeed, financed by the European Union, and lots of finance has gone into improving the border areas. That commitment is going to go when the UK leaves the European Union, so it is inevitable that the terms of the Good Friday agreement will be altered. My new clause would keep the changes to an absolute bare minimum, making only those changes that are absolutely necessary on account of Brexit.

Douglas Ross: I am grateful for that intervention, but the Government have been clear about their ongoing support for the Belfast agreement, and nothing that will materialise from Brexit or, importantly, the relevant clauses of the Bill we are discussing, will diminish that in any way.

Karlin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): The issue is not whether the Government are in agreement, but that they are co-guarantors of an international agreement.

Douglas Ross: I am not saying anything against that, but what I am trying to put across is that it is quite clear that there is support for the Belfast agreement without the need for new clause 70.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I accept everything that my hon. Friend is saying, and join him in paying tribute to the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon), but does he not agree that perhaps this is a time where some form of underpinning of the Good Friday agreement, by one means or another, might be helpful in building trust?

Douglas Ross: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. We are doing some of that by debating this very issue today. By proposing new clause 70, the hon. Member for North Down has allowed us the opportunity to discuss that in this place today.

3 pm

Dr Morrison: My hon. Friend is very generous in giving way. On the institutions that were set up under the Good Friday agreement and with regard to peace and prosperity on the border, does he agree that there is an ongoing duty on the European Union, established by article 8 of the Lisbon treaty, to promote neighbourliness, which will underpin all of the institutions to which the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) has referred?

Douglas Ross: I agree with my hon. Friend. Friend, and believe that it is useful to get that on record.
I want to move on to the amendments on the devolved Administrations under discussion today. My constituency of Moray was split right down the middle in Brexit. Of all the 382 areas in the United Kingdom that counted the votes on the European Union referendum, Moray had the closest result of anywhere. Out of 48,000 votes, just 122 votes, including my own, gave remain the edge over leave. None the less, Moray did come within a whisker of being the only Scottish local authority to vote leave.

Moray is not a bitterly divided community. Like most communities in Scotland, and indeed in the United Kingdom as a whole, people in Moray want Brexit to be done with as little disruption as possible. It is in that spirit that this Bill works to ensure that our statute book—our legal and regulatory infrastructure—continues to operate as normal after exit day. Due to the sheer amount of tweaks that will need to be made after more than four decades of our laws becoming ever more intertwined with those of the European Union, it is only right that the Government have delegated powers to effect those adjustments where appropriate.

Likewise, in the light of our devolution settlement, it is only right that the Scottish Government and the other devolved Administrations have delegated powers to make their own adjustments where appropriate.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman accept the concerns that have been raised by the Law Society of Scotland on the areas of this Bill relating to the separate legal system in Scotland?

Douglas Ross: I know Michael Clancy very well, and have seen the briefing that the Law Society provided for this debate. I accept its concerns on this, just as I accepted the many concerns that it had over plans in the Scottish Parliament that I debated in my time there. The Scottish Government were quite happy to ignore the evidence—

Neil Gray indicated dissent.

Douglas Ross: The hon. Gentleman is shaking his head, but the Law Society was absolutely against the Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Act 2012 and continues to be. The Scottish Government and the SNP Members north of the border are happy to ignore the views of the Scottish Parliament when they do not suit their argument. Now SNP Members in this Chamber tell us that we have to agree with absolutely everything that the Law Society says.

Stephen Kerr: On that point, did the Scottish Parliament not vote that that 2012 Act should be repealed?

Douglas Ross: I believe that we may be straying slightly from the point. I may now have to declare an interest as a football referee in Scotland. Yes, my hon. Friend is correct that the Scottish Parliament has voted for that Act to be repealed, and the SNP has still done nothing about it.

Much of what we are discussing today should not be controversial. Quite simply, it is what is needed to keep our industries properly regulated on 30 March 2019. Brexit is happening; it is happening to the entire United Kingdom, and it is our duty now to ensure that it goes as smoothly as possible.

There appear to be two broad themes in the proposed amendments to schedule 2. Some amendments restrict the powers given to the devolved Administrations, while others expand them. Some of my Scottish Conservative colleagues have spoken about the need for a middle ground on clause 11. Well, with respect to clause 10 and schedule 2, it occurs to me that we have already got the middle ground. Amendments 209 and 307 take issue with the provision that a devolved authority may use its delegated powers as it “considers appropriate”. The SNP, it seems, would prefer to replace that with as it “considers necessary”, while Welsh Labour would prefer that a devolved authority make such provision as “is essential”. I welcome the SNP’s new-found restraint when it comes to the powers of the Scottish Government, who have spent the last decade centralising as much power as possible in their own hands. We are scrapsing it with the NHS in Scotland—centralisation from the SNP. We have already seen it with the police and fire services—centralisation from the SNP.

Several hon. Members rose—

Douglas Ross: I will give way in a minute. The SNP is obsessed with centralisation and it is to the detriment of communities such as mine in Moray and swathes of Scotland which have been let down by this centralising SNP Government.

Stephen Gethins: The hon. Gentleman refers a great deal to the Scottish Parliament. In the Scottish Parliament, the Scottish Government are bringing everyone together on the issues pertaining to this Bill and trying to seek consensus. Does he think that his Front-Bench team should follow the same example?

Douglas Ross: What I would really like to see is the SNP spokesperson on this issue discussing this very matter with the SNP’s Brexit Minister in Scotland. What we are seeing north of the border is a Brexit Minister and the Deputy First Minister engaging with the First Secretary of State and the Secretary of State for Scotland. Over the weekend, we heard some positive noises from both of my Governments—at United Kingdom level and at Scotland level—but that does not seem to be replicated by SNP Members here who simply want to show that they are against Brexit at all costs, and they want grievance politics over and above actually delivering for Scotland, which is very unfortunate.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab) rose—

Douglas Ross: I will not give way, as I wish to make some progress.

If the SNP wants to limit the power of the Scottish Government, it may do well to tell its colleagues in Holyrood to start returning power to local communities in Scotland. However, in this instance, SNP Members should be more trusting of themselves. “Appropriate” is, in fact, the appropriate word. Perhaps it is even the necessary or essential word. “Appropriate” gives the
devolved Administrations the right latitude to make adjustments that are genuinely effective. As I have said, it is crucial that the statute book continues to operate effectively after exit day, and we cannot risk setting our restrictions so tightly that we compromise that goal.

On the other hand, some of the proposed amendments aim to expand the powers of the devolved Administrations, and they risk, ultimately, undermining the vital internal market of the United Kingdom.

Sir Desmond Swayne: The difficulty is that it will be in the interests of Scotland that there is a swift increase in the volume of trade as a consequence of new trade agreements that are negotiated. That will be significantly limited if the powers to deliver those agreements have been diffused throughout the United Kingdom.

Douglas Ross: My right hon. Friend is completely correct. The SNP and its Members here seem to want to go for their ideological aims rather than protecting the vital internal market that is so important for Scotland and the United Kingdom. Let us take, for instance, allowing the devolved Administrations to amend directly applicable EU law. That would be inconsistent with the spirit of clause 11, which at least provisionally returns all that is currently the EU’s power to Westminster, and thus ensures that there is no divergence, and therefore no trade barriers, between the four nations of the UK after exit day.

Now, clause 11 is not perfect—we heard that earlier today from the Secretary of State for Scotland at Scottish Question Time and indeed from my colleagues on Monday—but I expect it to be improved. It should be improved through negotiations between the UK Government and the Scottish Government, and between the UK Government and the other devolved Administrations, not through the amendments before us today.

Once again, I urge the SNP to have more confidence in their own colleagues in Holyrood. I, for one, fully believe that these negotiations will reach a satisfactory conclusion by Report. As with the proposed amendments to clause 11, these amendments today are unnecessary and, indeed, even harmful. At a time when negotiations are taking place, it is totally wrong for these amendments to go through and shift the very ground on which those negotiations are based.

So we come to the middle ground, which is where I started my speech today. We maintain the existing restrictions on the devolved Administrations as a basis for the ongoing negotiations between the UK Government and the devolved Administrations, and in order to preserve the internal market of the UK, which is vital to businesses in my Moray constituency, vital to businesses in Scotland, and vital to businesses the length and breadth of the United Kingdom. We should maintain the existing provision—that the devolved Administrations may act where appropriate in order to ensure that they can use their delegated powers as effectively as possible and make Brexit as smooth as possible. The many proposed amendments to clause 10 and schedule 2 pull us in many different directions, none of which are good. The middle ground and the best ground is where we are already.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): I wish to speak to amendments 338, 346 and 347 in my name and the names of my hon. and right hon. Friends. I also wish to make it clear that my party and I would support new clause 70, should it be put to a vote. I was heartened by the intervention of the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), who said that he also supports the new clause.

As the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) argued so eloquently and persuasively, new clause 70 protects the Belfast principles throughout and beyond our departure from the European Union, just as Labour’s amendment 338 prevents delegated powers from being used in any way that would undermine the Good Friday agreement. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) for his thoughtful guidance in devising amendment 338.

Too many—including, I suspect, many of my constituents—see the Good Friday agreement as an event that took place almost 20 years ago, already consigned to the history books. The agreement was, and is, the result of years of work by too many committed souls to name each one. It is an agreement that is as moving to read now as it was then. Beautifully simple are the words that drew to an end the decades of brutality, misery and conflict that had befallen the island of Ireland and beyond for decades. None of us living on this side of the Irish sea can truly comprehend the opportunity for a new beginning for Northern Ireland that was made possible by the Good Friday agreement. The declaration of support for the agreement says it best:

“The tragedies of the past have left a deep and profoundly regrettable legacy of suffering. We must never forget those who have died or been injured, and their families. But we can best honour them through a fresh start, in which we firmly dedicate ourselves to the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance, and mutual trust, and to the protection and vindication of the human rights of all.”

To say that the Labour party is proud of its role in bringing the agreement into being does not convey sufficiently the time, political and emotional investment made by Tony Blair, Paul Murphy, Mo Mowlam, Jonathan Powell and countless others, by choice, in the process. Peace and security in Northern Ireland mattered to the Labour party then and it matters no less to us now. But it is important to say, too, that the work of John Major and many in this Chamber should be recognised, appreciated and acknowledged.

We have seen this week that all the challenges involved with implementing the UK’s decision to leave the European Union unite and are magnified in the context of Northern Ireland. The separation by sea from the rest of the UK and the joining by land of Northern Ireland to the Republic of Ireland quickly expose the weaknesses of any flippant attempt to provide a single line answer to the question of our future relationship with the EU.

Northern Ireland finds us out. It is the test by which any proposed deals can be said to succeed or to fail. Ruling out the customs union and a changed relationship with the single market before trade talks have even begun fails the Northern Ireland test. Why? Because of the potential reappearance of a hard border, which all parties say they do not wish to see. But we cannot wish away problems. If we have different tariff arrangements from the EU, we will need to collect tariffs from the EU, and the EU will need to collect tariffs from us. If we
have different product standards and regulations, goods will need to be inspected to see if they are allowed in each other’s markets, particularly agricultural produce. In Norway and Sweden, that means a hard border. In America and Canada, that also means a hard border. Ambition is not enough to prevent it from meaning a hard border on the island of Ireland too.

Dr Murrison: To my knowledge, the United Kingdom Government are not proposing to erect tariff barriers, and they do not want to have regulation. Therefore, there would be no need for a hard border in the way in which the hon. Lady describes. If the European Union wishes to collect tariffs or erect regulatory barriers, the European Union will have to erect a hard border, but the UK Government surely cannot be answerable for that.

Jenny Chapman: I struggle to see how the originator of the border—who would erect it—is of any consequence to the people of Northern Ireland. A border is a border and it needs to be avoided at all costs.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): It is quite clear that the proponents of Scotland remaining in the UK during the 2014 Scottish independence referendum were right to argue that taking Scotland out of the UK single market would mean the erection of a hard border at Berwick. Given what we have just heard from the hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), does my hon. Friend think that the situation would be any different in the context of Northern Ireland?

Jenny Chapman: As earlier contributors have made clear, this issue is the one that finds out the fantasists from the realists. If the Government have the ambition of avoiding a hard border in Northern Ireland, they need to explain exactly how they intend to achieve that.

Stephen Kerr: Is not the hon. Lady putting the cart before the horse? The next phase of the negotiations will determine the future relationship between the EU and the UK. Is not she assuming an outcome that very few people would actually be in favour of?

Jenny Chapman: I am just making it very clear to the Government and all other observers that this matter is not something on which the Labour party is prepared to compromise. That point may need to be made again as we proceed, but it absolutely ought to be made now too.

Anna Soubry: Perhaps the hon. Lady can help us. Does she agree that it is absolutely agreed by everybody—the EU, Ireland, Northern Ireland and everybody here—that we do not want a hard border, and that the Government have accepted that there will be a hard border unless we get a proper deal, which is why they conceded that point and offered up solutions in their White Paper? Would she further agree that the difficulty is that the solutions that have been offered up are unworkable unless the Prime Minister’s excellent idea is put across the whole United Kingdom? It is a great idea, but it should not apply only to Northern Ireland because we are a Union.

Jenny Chapman: I agree with the right hon. Lady, and she can probably guess that I will be making the point later in my speech that we need a solution that works for the whole United Kingdom.

The next issue is north-south co-operation. The Committee will know that strand 2 of the Good Friday agreement sets out a framework under which the Administrations in Belfast and Dublin can establish some common policies across the island of Ireland. I am sorry, Mr Streeter; I have missed out an important section of my speech. I will just go back and ensure that I do not omit any important issues. This is the peril of taking too many interventions.

The point I wanted to make is that we cannot simply wish away problems, that if we have different tariff arrangements from the EU, we will need to collect tariffs from the EU and the EU will need to collect tariffs from us, and that the Government’s ambition is not enough to prevent the reintroduction of a hard border on the island of Ireland. Therefore, the north-south co-operation that has been established is incredibly important, and the United Kingdom has a solemn commitment to support this co-operation.

From strand 2, the island of Ireland has the six north-south implementation bodies, and the co-operative work of the North South Ministerial Council. The European Commission reportedly estimates that there are 142 areas of north-south co-operation that are affected by EU rules and regulations. The Government may quibble with that number, but there can be no doubt that common EU rules and regulations facilitate co-operation in areas such as the environment, health, agriculture, energy, higher education and telecommunications.

It was always envisaged by the parties to the peace process that EU rules and regulations would help to facilitate north-south co-operation. The Belfast agreement states that the North South Ministerial Council will “consider the European Union dimension of relevant matters, including the implementation of EU policies and programmes and proposals under consideration in the EU framework.”

As Britain leaves the EU, it falls to this generation of political leaders to face up to the challenges that Brexit poses to the Good Friday agreement and make good on the efforts of those who worked so hard to reach agreement in 1998. We must cherish and respect what was achieved almost 20 years ago.

We need to preserve not only the institutions that were set up in relation to strands 1, 2 and 3 of the Good Friday agreement, but human rights and equality, the principle of consent and citizenship rights. The understanding that it is for the people of Northern Ireland, and the people of Northern Ireland alone, to determine their future is the principle that underpins the Good Friday agreement and subsequent agreements. The UK Government and the Irish Government are co-guarantors of the agreement and together must ensure that that promise is kept.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Yes, the Irish Government and Her Majesty’s Government are co-guarantors, but does the hon. Lady agree that the Irish Government have acted in very bad faith by dismissing the views of a vast number of people in Northern Ireland on the issue of Brexit?
Continued progress in Northern Ireland goes hand in hand with prosperity and stability. The Good Friday agreement and subsequent agreements have provided certainty about the continuation of an approach to the future of Northern Ireland that is shared between the British and Irish Governments and the people of Northern Ireland. Putting a commitment to the agreement on the face of the Bill and preventing Ministers from legislating in any way that is contrary to the agreement would provide some of the clarity, certainty and reassurance that the businesses and citizens of Northern Ireland say they need.

Let us pause to reflect on the heart of the issue that the Good Friday agreement settled: the violence between communities and traditions that raged for generations and that took and scarred so many lives in Northern Ireland. Today, the people of Northern Ireland, so many of whom were affected by the troubles, will be watching, waiting and hoping that the Government can offer a cast-iron guarantee that the Good Friday agreement will be protected and preserved in every sense. There has been much talk of red lines as we have debated Brexit since the vote to leave. Maintaining our commitment to the Good Friday agreement and guaranteeing that Ministers cannot legislate incompatibly with it should be a red line for every last one of us in this Parliament.

The Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, the Confederation of British Industry in Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action and the Ulster Farmers Union got it right when they produced an agreed position on the Brexit negotiations. They say that an “open frictionless border” must be maintained between Ireland and Northern Ireland, and between Great Britain and the island of Ireland. They say that “Brexit must not be used as a pretext to dismantle hard won workers’ rights or to drive down employment standards”.

On this and on many other issues, the Labour party is as one with the people of Northern Ireland. There must be no hard border, the preservation of the common travel area between Ireland and the UK, no undermining of the Good Friday agreement, and full involvement of workers’ representatives, business and the community and voluntary sectors in articulating the concerns and protecting the interests of all citizens of Northern Ireland.

Indeed, everybody sensible who examines this issue in any depth soon reaches the conclusion that the Government must do what they have as yet failed to do and answer the question of how they plan to achieve their objective of no physical infrastructure and no customs border, as outlined in their position paper earlier this year. But however it they must, because a hardening of the border will undoubtedly harm business and the economy. I was left in no doubt about that when I met farmers and business leaders in Northern Ireland recently. It will also harm the everyday lives of those who frequently cross the border for social, cultural, leisure, educational or health reasons. Whether it is because of the outstanding work that has been done by CAWT—co-operation and working together—in recent years to make sure that the border is not a barrier to accessing healthcare or the thriving agri-food trade that makes up 33% of north-south trade, avoiding a hard border must be our ambition.

If we are to have non-negotiable issues, the avoidance of a hard border in Northern Ireland should be the thickest and most indelible of red lines. As the Brexit Select Committee said in its report:

“We also recognise the unique challenges posed by the need to preserve the peace settlement in Northern Ireland, including issues that go far beyond trade and customs.”

Everybody knows that this is not just about moving butter; it is about daily life and identity for thousands of people. The Select Committee goes on to ask: how will the Government avoid a hard border if no deal is reached by 29 March 2019?

Jenny Chapman: No, I do not agree with that at all and I will not be tempted into some kind of debate about it. If the hon. Gentleman wants to make a speech to that effect, he is very welcome to do so, but I will not agree with him.

Those elements of the agreement matter not only because they were necessary to bring lasting peace, but because they have enabled the economic rebirth of Northern Ireland. Nothing harms the prospects of young people or businesses like uncertainty and instability. Northern Ireland benefits from natural beauty, the ingenuity, creativity and resilience of its people, and a shared determination to never return to the suffering of the past. As a non-partisan coalition of businesses put it, we must ensure that “society in Northern Ireland does not become collateral damage in any Brexit discussions.”

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): It is a pleasure
balance by focusing on the specific aims of the powers and by applying safeguards. That will ensure, for instance, that they are not used in ways that might disrupt the ongoing EU negotiations or the workings of our internal market. Today is an opportunity for the Committee to examine how we have struck that balance, and I will continue to listen with great interest to the views of Members across the Committee.

I am grateful for the contributions that have been made by committees in the devolved legislatures to the debate that we are having today. I am also grateful to those who gave evidence to those committees. These are complex matters and I welcome their engagement and the attention that these issues have been given. We will consider carefully all the evidence that has been put forward by those committees in today's debate.

We have heard a huge amount in this debate about the importance of the Belfast agreement. I say to the hon. Member for North Down that we appreciate enormously the attention and work she has put into the new clause. Her new clause seeks to clarify that any Ministers using the powers in the Bill would have to have regard to, and abide by, the Belfast agreement. We absolutely recognise the importance of the issue that she raises. I think I can safely say that her opening speech was one of the most powerful evocations of the importance of that agreement. I pay tribute to her for the courage and clarity of her remarks.

3.30 pm

The Belfast agreement is of vital significance. We welcome the opportunity to put this issue at the forefront of this debate and emphasise how the Belfast agreement and our commitment to it will be unaffected by our exit from the European Union and by this Bill. The hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) spoke passionately about this issue on day four of the Committee. I pay tribute to his work and that of many current and former Members, who sadly are no longer with us, who worked so hard to bring the agreement forward and to secure its legacy. I thank all those who have contributed to that.

I will, if I may, return to the hon. Lady’s new clause in more detail towards the end of my speech. I note that this issue has also been raised in amendment 338 in the name of the Leader of the Opposition. That amendment does not provide for anything that is not provided for by our current obligations under the Belfast agreement and the British-Irish agreement. The Government remain absolutely steadfast in our commitment to those agreements and to our associated obligations under international law. Those include, as the amendment lists, the institutions; the commitment to human rights and equality reflected in the European convention on human rights; the principle of consent, which many Members have referred to; and the citizenship rights, which we have been clear that we want to protect through the withdrawal agreement.

Similarly, new clause 39 and amendment 157, tabled by the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn), and amendment 147, in the name of the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), are concerned with maintaining the provisions of the Northern Ireland Act and the Belfast/Good Friday agreement in relation to the withdrawal agreement power in clause 9. Amendments 145, 146, 346 and 347, in the name of the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington and the Leader of the Opposition, replicate those protections for the Belfast/Good Friday agreement in the international obligations power, clarifying that that power can be used to remedy breaches of the agreements.

I recognise the strength of feeling across the whole Committee, which has been expressed today from both sides, on the principles underpinning all these amendments. The Government fully recognise the standing and significance of the Belfast agreement. From the Prime Minister’s article 50 letter to the Northern Ireland and Ireland position paper published in August, to which the hon. Member for Darlington referred, our message has been consistent: the Belfast agreement is a top priority and the Government are fully committed to it. To avoid any shadow of a doubt, none of the powers in this Bill enables Ministers to undermine or amend the Belfast agreement.

For that reason also, I assure hon. Members that amendment 144, tabled by the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, is not necessary. The clause 7 power is already restricted from making corrections to the Northern Ireland Act, specifically because—I gave evidence on this to the Exiting the European Union Committee and to committees in the Scottish Parliament—that is the main statutory manifestation of the Belfast agreement. The only exception to this restriction—the hon. Member for Darlington sought some clarity on this point—is to enable us to fix the deficiency in the Northern Ireland Act, as described in the Bill, relating to the existing reservation found in all three devolution statutes on the technical standards and requirements arising from EU obligations. UK Government officials want and need to engage further with their counterparts in all three devolved Administrations, including Northern Ireland, to ensure that the correction made on this detailed matter does not change the boundaries of devolved competence. I assure the Committee that it is purely for this reason that we have not addressed this so far in the Bill for any of the three devolution statutes.

Our commitment to and implementation of the Belfast agreement shapes all the Government’s work in relation to Northern Ireland. I point to the recently agreed framework principles that explicitly reference the Belfast agreement and the ongoing talks led by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to restore the Northern Ireland Executive as further demonstration of our ongoing commitment to the Belfast agreement. The Government are wholly committed, as my right hon. and learned Friends the Members for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) and for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) have said, to the Belfast agreement, and we have accepted our commitments to that under international law. Nothing about our leaving the EU will change that. These amendments, well intentioned as they may be, are therefore, in many cases, unnecessary.

However, while also observing the Belfast agreement, we do need to be able to give effect to whatever we agree with the EU and ensure that we comply with our new international obligations under the withdrawal agreement. Inserting additional restrictions such as that in amendment 146, in the name of the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, removes the flexibility necessary to ensure that we can deliver maximum legal certainty on day one of exit across the UK. That is in no one’s interests.
Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): The Minister has told us that he is not going to accept new clause 70. Timing is important, too. Does he realise the signal that will be sent out if Ministers ask their party to vote against it at the end of this debate?

Mr Walker: Let me reiterate to the right hon. Gentleman that we are absolutely committed to the Belfast/Good Friday agreement.

I will now turn to some of the technical detail on new clause 70, because it is important to reflect that, as I said at the beginning, we support the principles behind it.

Anna Soubry rose—

Mr Walker: If my right hon. Friend will give me a moment, she may be interested in what I have to say next.

I do appreciate the enormous effort that the hon. Member for North Down has put into drafting new clause 70, but we could not currently accept it. There are some concerns around it. It goes further than requiring Ministers and devolved Departments to have regard to the key principles. Subsection (4)(a) would require the Secretary of State to refuse consent to reserved provisions in devolved legislation unless the provision is necessary only as a direct consequence of the UK’s exit from the EU. This would place a much greater constraint on the provision than can be made for Northern Ireland as compared with the rest of the UK, even in circumstances where there is no impact on the Belfast agreement. As I said earlier, this Bill cannot be used to amend the Belfast agreement. It would create doubt and uncertainty on the use of these powers if we suggested otherwise.

The Northern Ireland Act can be amended only in the very limited circumstances that I have already addressed.

I therefore urge the hon. Lady to withdraw the motion, but to work with us. We will work with Members across the House to absolutely ensure that the Belfast agreement is respected as we move forward.

Lady Hermon: I have a very high regard for the Minister, but I have to say that I am profoundly disappointed by what he has said. I am not a legislative draftsman. Technically, there may be difficulties with this new clause, but, for goodness’ sake, the Government absolutely have to put the principles of the Good Friday agreement into this Bill. That is where the Government need to stand with all the people of Northern Ireland and say to them that, even if we are leaving Europe, as we are doing—Brexit is going to happen—we are not going to allow that decision to undermine the sterling work and the peace and stability of the Good Friday agreement. I am pleading with the Government to give a commitment that they will look at the technicalities, and change the technicalities, but accept this new clause this afternoon.

Mr Walker: Our commitment to the Belfast agreement is absolutely clear. We are committed to it. We are not changing it as a result of this Bill. The Bill would not allow us to do that. We are protecting the Northern Ireland Act in this Bill. We will work with the hon. Lady and with hon. Gentlemen and hon. Ladies in all parts of the House to secure the legacy of the Belfast agreement.

Mr Kenneth Clarke: My hon. Friend keeps reiterating, with ever greater passion, the Government’s 110% commitment to the Belfast agreement. The reason for not putting it into the Bill is, with great respect, an extremely obscure drafting point, which I have tried to follow but cannot quite, because the provision that he refers to is extremely narrow indeed. It applies to possibilities that may arise after withdrawal from Europe—minor consequences. If there is anything wrong with the drafting, the Government can correct that on Report and they will probably not meet any passionate resistance from anyone in the House. In view of what the Minister said, the Government should show their commitment by accepting the new clause, and all this other footnote stuff can be sorted out at a later stage.

Mr Walker: I have great respect for my right hon. and learned Friend. On the point that he makes, the Government have absolutely accepted their commitments to the Belfast agreement. It is already a matter of international law. We are committed to that agreement. It is annexed to the British-Irish treaty, and we will continue to respect it in the way in which we approach this whole issue. We will work across the House, as we always have, constructively to ensure that the approach that we take is absolutely in line with the Belfast agreement, and we have done that throughout this process.

Stephen Doughty: I, too, share the serious disappointment expressed by the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon). I reiterate the comments that have just been made by the Father of the House. It would send the strongest signal if the Government accepted the new clause, coming back to the House to correct any technical deficiencies at a later stage. The Government are going to ask Members to vote against the principle of the Belfast agreement, which is an extraordinary thing to do. [Interruption.] No matter what the Minister says, that is a very dangerous situation.

Mr Walker: Let me make it clear to the hon. Gentleman that no one who supports the Bill will vote against any principles in the Belfast agreement. It is absolutely clear that the Belfast agreement is protected, and I believe that is a commitment that we intend absolutely to continue to deliver on. We cannot accept an amendment that, in this case, would create doubt about the protection of the Northern Ireland Act. We need to ensure that through this process we create continuity and certainty. I again urge the hon. Member for North Down not to press the new clause, because our commitment is absolute. We will meet that commitment to the Belfast agreement. If she does press the new clause to a vote, that could create the wrong impression for some people outside the House.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): In all honesty, no one in the House who has ever been a Minister or has had any responsibility at all understands what the Minister is talking about. Minister after Minister has accepted amendments with which they agreed, then asked their draftsmen to sort out any technical issues. Instead of doing the sensible thing and doing that, the Minister and Government Whips—well, as I hope, the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) pushes the new clause to a vote—will ask their MPs to vote against the principles of the Good Friday agreement. That is how it will be seen by people who look at votes in the House.
Mr Walker: Let me repeat to the hon. Gentleman what I have made very, very clear: no one in the House would be voting against those principles. The Government absolutely support those principles, which are enshrined in the Northern Ireland Act, which is protected under the Bill.

Dr Murrison: I urge the Minister to hold his ground. My principal difficulty with new clause 70 is that it is purely declaratory. He has made it as clear as he possibly can that the Government are committed to the Good Friday agreement, as are we all. The Minister and his colleagues have resisted declaratory amendments to the Bill, and they should do so again on this occasion.

Mr Walker: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who chairs the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs. I was pleased to give evidence to his Committee the other day on the importance of these issues. I can assure hon. Members that we absolutely have put the importance of no hard border in Northern Ireland and the importance of our commitments under the Belfast agreement at the heart of our approach from the beginning.

Lady Hermon: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way once again. I have to say to him ever so gently, but firmly, that that is a high-risk strategy. The message will be sent from the House that there is no support in the Government for the principles of the Good Friday agreement if that is not taken up. Would the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) give me a moment? It would be enormously helpful—it is the principles of the Good Friday agreement: that is what new clause 70 embodies. It does not expand on them—it reflects the principles of the agreement—so will the Minister, instead of putting that high-risk strategy to the House, give a clear commitment that he will take away my new clause and work on it, with a view positively to reflect the tone and spirit in which it was drafted in the first place?

Mr Walker: I absolutely give the commitment that we will take away the hon. Lady’s new clause and will ensure throughout the whole of the process that we protect the principles of the Good Friday/Belfast agreement. That is something that we are absolutely committed to doing and I can tell the hon. Lady that nobody in this House will be voting against any principles in the Belfast agreement. It is crucial that we make that point clear.

3.45 pm

Mr Grieve: I have great sympathy with the approach of the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) in her anxiety about seeing the Good Friday agreement respected. That said, it is right that it is an international agreement and I have some difficulty seeing how that can easily be incorporated in a statute relating to another matter. It is either declaratory or it has some effect—one or the other. I simply say to my hon. Friend the Minister that this is an area where the Government may seek and need to provide reassurance, but whether the hon. Lady is right that it needs to be specific on the face of the legislation is, I think, more complex, because it raises as many problems as it may provide answers.

Mr Walker: I am grateful to my right hon. and learned Friend for that point. I will now move on to other areas of the Bill, because I recognise that there is a huge interest in the 60 or so amendments on which we need to touch.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Walker: I will, briefly.

Owen Smith: I am grateful to the Minister, who is being extremely generous with his time. We do not for a minute doubt his commitment to the Good Friday/Belfast agreement. However, we on the Opposition Benches take incredibly seriously our bipartisan approach on Northern Ireland, and in that context I put it to him that he must listen to the statement from the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon), who says that in Northern Ireland this will be perceived as a backward step in support for the Good Friday/Belfast agreement by the Conservative Government. That is why he must think again.

Mr Walker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and for his comment earlier. I agree that we should continue to work on this issue in a bipartisan way, and not just in a bipartisan way but with all parties in Northern Ireland, and with the hon. Member for North Down, in taking this issue forward and providing all assurances that the legal protections in international law and the Northern Ireland Act, as well as all our commitments under the Belfast agreement, are met.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): Would the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) give me a moment? It would be enormously helpful—it is the principles of the Good Friday agreement: that is what new clause 70 embodies. It does not expand on them—it reflects the principles of the agreement—so will the Minister, instead of putting that high-risk strategy to the House, give a clear commitment that he will take away my new clause and work on it, with a view positively to reflect the tone and spirit in which it was drafted in the first place?

Mr Walker: I absolutely give the commitment that we will take away the hon. Lady’s new clause and will ensure throughout the whole of the process that we protect the principles of the Good Friday/Belfast agreement. That is something that we are absolutely committed to doing and I can tell the hon. Lady that nobody in this House will be voting against any principles in the Belfast agreement. It is crucial that we make that point clear.

I want to move on, and will turn to amendment 89, tabled by the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams), along with amendments 313 to 316, tabled by the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock). These amendments would prevent UK Ministers from being able to use powers in the Bill in areas of otherwise devolved competence. Additionally, the hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins), whom we have heard from today, has tabled amendments 161 to 163, which would require the consent of devolved Administrations for UK Ministers to exercise their powers in devolved areas.

I would like to take this opportunity to stress a simple but important fact: the concurrent powers in the Bill do not undermine the devolution settlement. Rather they give the UK Government and devolved Administrations
the tools required to respond to the shared challenge of ensuring the operability of our statute book in a collaborative way. This reflects current practice. Concurrent functions have always been a normal part of our devolution arrangements and they are an important tool in ensuring that we can work together in the most efficient way. Take, for instance, new schedule 3A to the Government of Wales Act 2006, which lists no fewer than 34 laws containing concurrent functions for UK and Welsh Ministers, including powers to make subordinate legislation. We should not forget that section 2(2) of the European Communities Act 1972 is concurrent and is routinely used to make a single set of regulations to implement directives relating to devolved matters, such as the Marine Strategy Regulations 2010. Removing the concurrent tool would remove the vital flexibility from which we and the devolved Administrations already benefit in preparing our statute book. Such flexibility and greater efficiency will be crucial if we are to achieve the considerable task ahead of having a complete and functioning statute book on exit day.

Amendments 161 to 163, tabled by the hon. Member for North East Fife, would add to the process additional layers that have not previously been needed for equivalent powers by requiring consent from devolved Ministers. This might render the Government and the devolved Administrations unable to ready the statute book for exit day, and they therefore threaten the legal certainty that the Bill is meant to deliver.

Let me remind Members on both sides of the Committee that the Government have already committed that we will not normally legislate to amend EU-derived domestic law relating to devolved matters using any of the powers in the Bill without the agreement of the devolved Administrations. The powers build on the existing successful ways of working between the UK Government and the devolved Administrations, and the Government have committed to this ongoing collaborative working. I therefore urge those hon. Members not to press their amendments.

I now turn to amendments 158, 159, 318, 320 and 321, tabled by the hon. Members for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) and for Aberavon. Taken together, the amendments would prevent amendment of the devolution statutes using the powers in clauses 7 to 9 and 17. In addition, amendment 160, in the name of the hon. Member for North East Fife, would require the consent of Scottish or Welsh Ministers if the Scotland Act 1998 or the Government of Wales Act 2006 were amended using the power in clause 9.

I want to start by saying that I have listened to and I am grateful for the debate we have already had on these amendments both in this Parliament and in Committees in other Parliaments. The Committee is right to pay careful attention to any changes to the devolution settlements, so I thank the hon. Members who have tabled these amendments and the Committees of the devolved legislatures that have drafted some of them for drawing attention to these issues.

A number of references in the provisions of the devolution statutes will not make sense once we leave the EU and will need correcting to ensure our statute book continues to function. We recognise the standing of these Acts, and for this reason we have corrected as many deficiencies as possible in the Bill—in part 2 of schedule 3. As Members will no doubt have noticed, these corrections are technical and I stress that they are devolution-neutral. They do not substantively change the boundaries of competence; nor will any of the corrections that are still to be made.

I want to reassure the Committee that we intend to correct the remaining deficiencies by working collaboratively and transparently with the devolved Administrations. Where possible, this will include correcting deficiencies using the existing powers such Acts already contain for amending the reservation schedules. This process with the devolved Administrations is already under way.

Specifically on the power to implement the withdrawal agreement—the topic of amendment 320, in the name of the hon. Member for Aberavon—it can be used to modify the devolution statutes only where it is appropriate to implement the agreement that will result from our negotiations with the EU. It cannot be used to modify them in any other way, and it simply is not true that any UK Minister can make any change they like to the devolution settlements. I hope I have reassured the Committee that the Government do understand that concern, but the amendment does not support our aim of a smooth and orderly exit.

Similarly, amendments 159 and 319 seek to restrict the use of the international obligations power to modify the Scotland Act or the Government of Wales Act. I want to be clear that these powers cannot be used to unpick or substantively change the devolution settlements. As I am sure the Committee will recognise, it is quite normal to use delegated powers in such a way. They have previously been used to amend the devolution statutes to ensure that our laws reflect the most accurate position in law, and ultimately to ensure that we fulfil our international obligations.

Jenny Chapman: I am slightly concerned that the Minister will sit down before he has had a chance to make any comment on amendment 338, in my name and those of my right hon. and hon. Friends, which would prevent Ministers from legislating in any way incompatible with the Good Friday agreement. I am sorry to refer him back to that, but I am concerned that he has not yet said anything about this amendment.

Mr Walker: I apologise to the hon. Lady. I think I mentioned that amendment in the run-up to addressing the detail of new clause 70 in the name of the hon. Member for North Down, but let me say that Ministers will not and cannot legislate incompatibly with the Good Friday agreement. We are bound by that agreement, and I have been very clear that this Government remain absolutely committed to the Good Friday agreement and have already put our obligations under it at the heart of our commitments.

On amendment 160 in the name of the hon. Member for North East Fife, I want to comment on the fact that such powers have previously been used, because it is important to recognise that this issue has already been addressed. For instance, the Treaty of Lisbon (Changes in Terminology) Order 2011, which was made under section 2(2) of the European Communities Act, amended the Scotland Act 1998, the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and the Government of Wales Act 2006 to give effect to new terminology relating to the European Union.
Leaving the EU will require changes of a similar technical nature across the settlements, and that is what the powers enable.

Stephen Gethins: I thank the Minister for going into such detail. Earlier today, the Secretary of State for Scotland said he would be introducing changes. To which amendments might those changes refer and when might they take place?

Mr Walker: I cannot say at this stage, but let me repeat that in both this debate and the debate on clause 11, we have been clear that we are listening to the Committee and engaging with it, and we will give the matters raised careful consideration. I think the comments made by the Secretary of State for Scotland reflect that approach. It is important that we move forward together with all the devolved Administrations and ensure that the United Kingdom and each part of it can deal properly with their statute book.

Anna Soubry: I know the Minister wants to make progress, but I have grave fears. Is there not some way we can sort out the business of new clause 70? I am not saying that the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) should withdraw it, but it seems to me that there is a better way. I do not know whether the hon. Lady has met the Minister and the Solicitor General, but we should put a meeting together and get it sorted out—get the assurances. I trust the Minister and what he says at the Dispatch Box, but there is going to be a big problem with misinterpreting any vote against the new clause. It needs to be sorted, and I suggest that the hon. Lady and the Minister meet to see whether this can be sorted out.

Mr Walker: I am happy to take up my right hon. Friend’s suggestion, and to work with the hon. Member for North Down and Members in all parts of the House. The hon. Lady has expressed a strong position and I will work with her to ensure that, as we go through this process, we do everything in our power to continue to protect the Good Friday agreement. My right hon. Friend makes a constructive suggestion, which I welcome.

Clause 17 is the subject of amendment 321, tabled by the hon. Member for Aberavon, whom we have missed in these debates. I emphasise that we have sought to include the majority of consequential amendments needed to the devolution settlements in the Bill, in schedule 3 part 2, but we must be equipped to fix any additional problems that come to light and this standard power, constrained by case law, is the right way to do any tidying up—for example, of cross-references—that could be needed as a result of the Bill coming into force.

The hon. Gentleman also tabled amendments 322 to 327, which would constrain Welsh Ministers’ ability to modify the Government of Wales Act 2006, including removing their ability to correct those parts of the Act that currently fall within devolved responsibility. The 2006 Act is, for the most part, a protected enactment, which means that it cannot generally be modified by the devolved institutions. That makes sense, because the Act sets out how powers are devolved to Wales, but there are certain exceptions to that protection: that is, where it is agreed that it should be within the legislative competence of the Assembly to modify that Act. That was agreed by this Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales when the 2006 Act was passed and again when the Wales Act 2017 was passed.

Ensuring that devolved Ministers have those powers follows the reasoning and decisions made in enacting those Acts and respects the decision of this House and that of the National Assembly for Wales in giving consent. We think it right that, in those areas, Welsh Ministers should be able to use their power to correct deficiencies. Where Welsh Ministers need to make corrections to the 2006 Act, the National Assembly will of course have the ability to scrutinise any changes and to set out the approach to scrutiny that it proposes to take. We do not think, therefore, that the amendments would place a reasonable restriction on Welsh Ministers, as it would put them at significant disadvantage in ensuring that the 2006 Act is fit for purpose, legally sound, and reflects the context of leaving the European Union. I urge the hon. Member for Aberavon not to press those amendments.

Stephen Doughty: The cross-party amendments would not have been tabled, or indeed recommended by the Welsh and Scottish Governments, if everything was hunky-dory and fine in the negotiations between the UK Government and the devolved Administrations. We got some movement from the Secretary of State for Scotland this morning. Will the Under-Secretary of State also move on amendment 158, which stands in my name, and perhaps on some of the other concerns that the Welsh and Scottish Governments have set out so clearly?

Mr Walker: I absolutely respect the effort of, and have referred a number of times to the evidence collected by, Committees; some of these amendments are tabled by Committees, and we respect that. We want to engage with them, which is why I am trying to give a comprehensive response on all these matters. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will be pleased with some of the things I have to say. We absolutely want to engage with the Committees, because I recognise that we are talking about important institutions that we need to engage with successfully. With that in mind, I have been to give evidence to Committees of the Assembly and the Scottish Parliament, so I say to the hon. Gentleman: keep listening.

4 pm

Amendments 209, 210, 212 and 215 in the name of the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) and 307 to 312 in the name of the hon. Member for Aberavon are about whether the powers in schedule 2 should follow “necessary” or “essential”, rather than “appropriate”, corrections. Similar amendments have been tabled to clauses 7 to 9, which we will debate next week. The amendments in the name of the hon. Member for Aberavon were proposed by the National Assembly for Wales’s External Affairs and Additional Legislation Committee. I acknowledge the detailed work and scrutiny of the Committees in the devolved legislatures, particularly on these amendments. I am grateful to those Committees for their invitations, and for the opportunity to provide evidence in Cardiff and Edinburgh alongside Secretaries of State and the Minister with responsibility for the constitution, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore). I reaffirm the commitment to ongoing engagement with devolved legislatures.
Hon. Members will not be surprised to hear—my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) brilliantly pre-empted this point—that "necessary" or "essential" would be very strict tests and could be interpreted by a court to mean logically essential. Where two or more choices in how to correct EU law are available to Ministers, arguably neither one is strictly necessary, because there is an alternative. Ministers need to be able to exercise discretion in choosing the most appropriate course. For example, if two agencies could arguably carry out a similar function, the UK Government, or in this case the devolved Administration, must propose which would be the more appropriate choice. “Necessary” or “essential” would risk constraining the use of the power to such an extent that the programme of crucial secondary legislation that is to be made using these powers might not be deliverable.

I repeat the assurance that I gave to the Scottish Parliament’s Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee: the purpose of these powers is not to make substantive changes to policy, but simply to allow devolved Administrations and the UK Government to prepare our laws for exit day. The decisions that we take in doing so will be subject to the scrutiny of the devolved legislatures and this Parliament.

Of course we recognise that there are concerns, in this House and outside, about the breadth of the UK Government and devolved Administrations’ powers and how they will be used. In order to increase understanding, we intend to place in the Library ahead of next week’s debate two draft statutory instruments on employment rights that illustrate how these powers will be used in an area that I know is of particular interest across the House. I hope that on that basis, hon. Members will feel able not to press their amendments.

Amendments 287 and 290 in the name of the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) are aimed at protecting our citizens’ rights in relation to powers conferred on devolved Ministers. Let me first reiterate the Government’s firm commitment not to roll back rights. We share this commitment and ambition with the devolved Administrations where they will and outside, about the breadth of the UK legislatures and this Parliament.

We discussed at great length the merits and challenges of clause 11 on day 4, and there were excellent speeches from my Scottish Conservative colleagues and from across the Committee, but the Committee supported the approach of maintaining existing frameworks, which is subject to the JMC (EN) and wider framework process, and the agreement of principles. That argument applies equally to what we are discussing. Direct EU law is part of the structure of our common frameworks. Corrections to those laws, which apply consistently throughout the UK, need to be co-ordinated in the immediate term to preserve those common frameworks so that we can provide continuity and maximise certainty for individuals and businesses across the UK.

It is wrong to suggest that that would in any way roll back the powers of the devolved Administrations because while the UK has been a member of the EU, they have never had the discretion to amend, repeal or in any way act incompatibly with those directly applicable EU laws. Removing the current restrictions would create a new discretion, allowing for problematic divergence immediately after exit in matters where uniform law is currently in place. We cannot accept that.

However, let me be clear: the devolved Administrations will have a role in determining how the laws should be amended because we will consult them when using the powers to amend direct, retained EU law in matters that are otherwise devolved.

Stephen Gethins: I am grateful to the Minister for his detailed responses. He talks about consulting. In an internal market, about which the Minister has spoken, there are different states that have an equal say. What will the arbitration mechanism be and will the Government go further than merely consulting the devolved Administrations?

Mr Walker: As we discussed in great detail on day 4, direct Government-to-Government contact is happening on those issues. We have the JMC process—it will meet next week—and I hope that we can all agree ways to move forward that allow this to be delivered for each part of the UK. The consultation process will ensure that we take the approach that works best for the UK as a whole and takes into account the needs of each part of the UK. It will also ensure that existing common approaches are not undermined while we work through with the devolved Administrations where they will and will not apply.

Deidre Brock: The Minister failed to answer the question that my hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) asked. What will the arbitration mechanism be for deciding that?

Mr Walker: I do not want to pre-empt the agreement that I believe can and will be reached in the not-too-distant future through the JMC process. That is not what we
are legislating for. We are legislating for providing continuity and certainty across the UK. I have just described how we can ensure that that delivers for every part of the UK. That is important.

Amendments 168 and 175 are related to the amendments I have just discussed. They would remove the restrictions on devolved authorities using the correcting power and the withdrawal agreement power to confer functions that correspond to EU tertiary legislation. Examples of tertiary legislation include the vast majority of the technical detail of financial services law, which is set out in a form of tertiary legislation known as binding technical standards. They are functions that are currently exercised at EU level. Just as with direct, retained EU laws, the rules made under them apply uniformly across the UK. We therefore believe that where such functions need to continue, it is right and consistent with our overall approach for the decisions about who should exercise them to sit at UK level. Of course, it will be possible for UK Ministers to confer such functions on the devolved Administrations or devolved public bodies, if we agree together that that is appropriate. That will be subject to the wider negotiations on shared frameworks.

I will deal with amendments 166 and 170, again tabled by the hon. Member for North East Fife and amendment 173, which the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth tabled. They would allow the devolved Administrations to sub-delegate the powers conferred on them by schedule 2. We do not advocate prohibiting sub-delegation by the devolved Administrations in every circumstance. It is explicit on the face of the Bill that sub-delegation is permitted for rules and procedures for courts and tribunals. Rather, it is our view that these powers should not be broader than is appropriate, and that sub-delegation by devolved Administrations should therefore not be admitted in every circumstance. However, as I said to the Committees, I should welcome any examples of areas in which Members believe that sub-delegation by devolved Administrations would be needed, and I will take away and consider any examples that are provided today. We are having discussions with the devolved Administrations as well, so they will also have opportunities to provide such examples.

Amendment 317 would take the unusual step of conferring on Welsh Ministers the power to make consequential and transitional provision. That is because the corresponding amendment to clause 17 would prevent UK Ministers from using the power in relation to matters that are within the competence of Welsh Ministers. It is not normal to confer such powers on devolved Ministers in an Act of Parliament. The Wales Act 2017 contained the power, but conferred it only on UK Ministers. Despite the great constitutional significance of that Act, there were neither calls for the power to be taken from UK Ministers in relation to devolved matters in Wales, nor calls for it to be granted to Welsh Ministers.

In the interests of transparency and accountability, we have sought to include in the Bill a number of significant consequential and transitional provisions that are necessary in relation to devolved matters. I should welcome any further explanation of instances in which devolved Administrations would need to make such types of consequential amendment. We do not currently think that there is any need for the power to be conferred on devolved Ministers as a result of the Bill that would reverse usual practice, and I urge Members not to press the amendment to a vote.

Let me finally deal with amendments 169, 172 and 176. I thank Members for their careful consideration of these technical provisions. The amendments relate to clauses that provide safeguards to ensure that due consideration is given when Ministers in devolved Administrations use their powers in ways that have implications for the rest of the UK. The amendments would, in effect, convert the requirements for devolved Ministers to gain the consent of UK Ministers when exercising the powers in certain circumstances into consultation requirements.

Let me turn first to the requirements included for international obligations and withdrawal agreement powers. Here the safeguards are focused principally on obligations that will need to be met at a UK level: the management of UK-wide quotas and our UK obligations under the World Trade Organisation agreement. We therefore believe that there is an important role for the UK Government to play in agreeing such amendments in these limited circumstances, given the broader consequences for other parts of the UK. Indeed, where the powers exist in order to implement the UK’s international agreements, it is important that that can be done expeditiously and fairly within the UK so that we can meet those international obligations, and that requires a common view across the UK.

Again, we have taken the view that the right approach is to require consent for that purpose. A requirement of consent provides a clear and decisive process for us to ensure that the interests of each part of the UK are taken into account. The requirements included for the correcting power are primarily concerned with our relationship with the EU. It is right that we consider any use of such powers that could prejudice the EU negotiations, and that is why we think it is right to include the consent requirements in the Bill.

I have made it clear that the Government stand ready to listen to those who have sincere suggestions for how we might improve the Bill. Today we have had a useful debate on this subject, and hon. Members have made the case that requiring consent might not be the right approach to the practical problem that I have described in relation to the correcting power in particular. Scottish Conservative Members and others have expressed concern about the issue. However, I assure the Committee that we will take away and carefully reflect on the suggestions that have been made today, and consider whether sufficient assurances can be provided through different means.

Karin Smyth: May I take the Minister back to new clause 70? Given the signals and impressions given by the House over many years in relation to British-Irish relations, he will appreciate the importance of what is happening today. Can he tell us when the Government decided not to accept the new clause? I understand that it was tabled several weeks ago. Did the Government make that decision before the weekend, or in the last few days?

Mr Walker: The Government have made their position absolutely clear, but let me again reiterate our firm commitment to the principles of the Belfast agreement,
and to ensuring that we respect and meet those principles throughout this process. I have offered to meet the hon. Member for North Down to continue this conversation and ensure that we do everything we can to meet those commitments throughout the process. I think it is important that we are listening and responding to these debates on behalf of the whole United Kingdom.

I conclude by extending my gratitude to Members for their thoughtful consideration of all these provisions. To allow us the time to consider the comments made and their important practical implications, including for our negotiations, I urge Members not to press their amendments today, but I reiterate the offer to continue to work with the hon. Lady and all others across this House, to ensure that we deliver on the principles and our commitments under the Belfast agreement.

Several hon. Members rose—

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I just point out that 15 Members still wish to speak and there is one hour to go.

4.15 pm

Ian Paisley: I will keep my comments as brief as possible. I congratulate the Members who have managed to bring various new clauses before the Committee of the whole House; they add to the debate and to the colour and tapestry of this place. In particular, I congratulate my colleague, indeed my cousin, the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) on introducing the lead new clause. Even though, as she knows, I do not agree with her on the principles, it has added to the debate.

Lady Hermon rose—

Ian Paisley: I will give way to the hon. Lady later, but I first want to explain some of my detailed points, given the warning we have just had from Mr Hoyle.

On new clause 70, the hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) said that the DUP does not speak for all of Northern Ireland. He is, of course, absolutely right, and we have never claimed to do so. However, there are seven Members who could be in this place tonight but who do not bother coming, and they could make many of the points that they claim they are so passionate about and support the provisions they wish to support. There is no reason in principle why they cannot be here; the reasons are political cowardice and political convenience only. But others cannot chastise my party and the people we represent in this place, because we do come here, we do make our voices heard, and we do raise the issues that we care passionately about and that are put to us. As the Member who received more votes in Northern Ireland than any other Northern Ireland Member, I am more than happy to speak for those people and ensure my constituents’ voice is heard on these issues. We will not take a vow of silence—which would be convenient to many in this House—out of some form of false shame.

Stephen Gethins: I rise to be helpful to the hon. Gentleman. When I made my comments, what I meant was that an issue as big as Brexit should require the Government to take on board as many views as possible. The hon. Gentleman is right to make the point he made: the SNP does not represent everybody in Scotland and the DUP does not represent everybody in Northern Ireland, and that is precisely why the Government should be reaching out.

Ian Paisley: I only go so far with that point, because it is wrong in this sense: every issue that comes before this House—whether a minor constituency petition or a major European withdrawal Bill—is important to the people we speak for, and we must give it the full weight and dignity that it therefore deserves.

I was delighted that tonight the Minister from the Dispatch Box nailed the fallacy that new clause 70 would bring about—the fallacy that that new clause is the only way that Her Majesty’s Government can show their commitment to the Good Friday agreement. That is common unnecessary grievance; this matter does not need to be brought before the Committee, as the Minister explained well. In fact, I would venture to suggest that the lives of soldiers and police officers, and the money from taxpayers from across the whole of the United Kingdom, as well as an international treaty, have in many ways demonstrated the Government’s commitment to the Good Friday agreement—the Belfast agreement—and the follow-on agreements. It is wrong to support this grievance culture that we are so good at in Northern Ireland. The Government are clear that they do support the Good Friday agreement, and it would be wrong to add it to this Bill. It diminishes an international treaty to say it has to be reinforced again in a Bill to which it is not relevant.

The Belfast agreement makes scant comment and reference in all of its 35 pages to the EU and its activities. It makes several references to the European convention on human rights, which is outwith the EU, and it is right to do so, and it makes one reference to the process of d’Hondt—a European mathematical mechanism for electing people in a particular way and sharing out political office—in its 35 pages, but there is no reference whatsoever to key elements of the EU.

Mr Geoffrey Cox (Torridge and West Devon) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a logical and thoughtful case. Does he not agree that all the substantive protections that were intended after 1998 to protect the Belfast agreement in Northern Ireland’s domestic law were introduced either in the Northern Ireland Act, or in specific statutes that still apply or will apply in retained law as a consequence of this legislation, and that all the substantive protections will therefore still exist? The declaratory or mandatory provision that would be introduced by new clause 70 would simply cut across those protections and introduce significant legal uncertainty.

Ian Paisley: The hon. and learned Gentleman has nailed it extremely well. By agreeing to this proposal, we would be diminishing the principles that many colleagues say they are signed up to and support, because we would be limiting the provisions to a few words on the front of this Bill. That would be unnecessary and the wrong way to treat an international treaty signed by Her Majesty’s Government and the Government of the Republic of Ireland.
No case has been made that demonstrates that the Belfast agreement will be directly impacted by this withdrawal Bill. People have talked about its impact tangentially, but no specific case for a direct impact has been made. That is because, as I have said, the claim that the agreement is in some way under threat from the Bill is a made-up grievance by the Irish. It is not under threat. It is irrelevant to the Bill. To entertain that claim plays into the domestic politics of the Republic of Ireland, and it is not our place to do that in this House. We should stay well away from that.

I do not often quote David Trimble—Lord Trimble, as he now is—but I am going to make an exception tonight, given that he was one of the authors, principal negotiators and signatories to the agreement. His words are extremely helpful. He has said:

“It is not true that Brexit in any way threatens the peace process. There is nothing in the Good Friday Agreement which even touches on the normal conduct of business between Northern Ireland and the Republic. Leaving the European Union does not affect the agreement because the EU had nothing to do with it—except that Michel Barnier turned up at the last moment for a photo opportunity. The European Union does have a peace and reconciliation programme for Northern Ireland but there is no provision for it in the EU budget. It is financed from loose change in the drawer of the European Commission.”

It is also the case that Her Majesty’s Government have committed to provisions for a reconciliation programme, which they will take forward post-Brexit. That will probably be a much more targeted and beneficial fund for many of the representatives of the third sector who are knocking on the doors of Northern Ireland Members of Parliament to demand that the money should be used a lot better. That helpful insight from David Trimble should be borne in mind by all Members on both sides of the House.

For those who say that they are so committed to the principles of the agreement, the Father of the House, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), pointed out what he called the oxymoron of the border issue. The fact of the matter is that the Irish foolishly got the matter of the border into phase 1 of the agenda. I believe that they were wrong to do that. They should have made sure that they got it into phase 2 or phase 3, because the real issue that concerns them is trade. The Irish have overplayed their hand considerably. They need a trade deal more urgently than Northern Ireland does.

Let us look briefly at the cost to the Republic of Ireland of having no deal. That is something that is never done in this place. We are always looking at what the cost to us would be, but the cost to our partner would be significant. If the Republic of Ireland does not get a trade deal, its GDP will collapse by 4% almost overnight. That is the figure that has been produced in its own Dáil report. The Republic of Ireland’s largest trading partners are the United Kingdom—with which it will no longer have a free trade arrangement—the USA, Canada, India and Australia. Those trading partners are more important than the EU to the Republic of Ireland. In the area of fishing alone, 40% of the Republic’s fishing market is in our waters. If we close those waters to the Republic of Ireland, the Spanish and Portuguese boats and other boats from across the EU will be fishing in the Irish box rather than in our fishing waters. Ireland would soon find that its fishing trade had gone completely.

It is utter madness for the Republic of Ireland to make this a key issue, because a closed border would damage it more. It is not my party saying that it wants to build a border. It is not the Government of Northern Ireland or Her Majesty’s Government. Who is going to build this border? Is it the Republic of Ireland? Is the EU going to instruct people to build it? We have indicated that there are other mechanisms by which we will control our border, and that is what we will do.

Finally, Mr Hoyle, much time has been taken discussing the regulatory consequences for Northern Ireland. Today at the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, industry representatives agreed that perhaps the tables should be turned on the Irish Government and they should follow UK regulations post-Brexit, rather than us following EU regulations. I suggest that maybe the Irish should be the ones who compromise. The hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) said that he supports regulatory alignment, but he seems to support it only if it applies to the whole UK, and not if it applies solely to Northern Ireland. I think that matter should also be nailed.

Finally, Mr Hoyle—[Interruption.] Those words often galvanise, Mr Hoyle. The utter confusion that the Labour party has shown on this matter is what confuses me most. The economic spokesman, John McDonnell, has said that we must leave the single market in order to respect the referendum result. The deputy leader, Tom Watson, has said that we should stay in the single market and the customs union permanently. Jonathan Ashworth and Jenny Chapman, the Front-Bench spokesmen here tonight, have said that we have to leave the single market. [Interruption.] Diane Abbott has said that we should keep freedom of movement—

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Mr Paisley, you know the rules on using Members’ names, and you did promise me that this was your final point. I think “Finally” is now here. You have two seconds before I call the next speaker.

Ian Paisley: The fact of the matter is that the utter confusion on the Opposition Front Bench on an issue as important as Brexit is only amplified when they give us this hand-wringing sanctity about supporting the Good Friday agreement but then give no evidence as to why provisions such as those proposed should be in the Bill.

Dr Murrison: I will be brief, Mr Hoyle. I would like to start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) on a truly spectacular speech. I wish that her new clause were a probing amendment, because then I would be even more fulsome in welcoming it. She has done us a great service by giving us this opportunity to affirm our commitment to the Good Friday agreement, and I am pleased that the Minister made that abundantly clear. It is important that we do that regularly, because although we might think that it is self-evident, it needs to be restated time and again.

I am ever so slightly disappointed by one Member—he is not in his place, so I will not name him—who seemed to suggest that those of us who will not support the new clause, if it is pressed to a vote this evening, are in some way villainous. That is not good. That is not the right thing to be suggesting to people outside this place.
If the new clause falls this evening, that will in no way suggest that this House’s support for the Good Friday agreement is diminished. We have made it abundantly clear today that that commitment stands and is embodied in international law, and nothing we need to do with the Bill will amend or alter that in any way.

My worry with the new clause is that it is declaratory. We are lucky to have our hon. and learned Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr Cox) here to opine on the matter and on the complexity that would be introduced into legislation, perhaps giving his colleagues a bean feast in picking apart competing bits of legislation, were we to accept the new clause.

I am putting in mind of similar amendments considered in Committee on previous days. I am thinking particularly of the pressure placed on me, and I suspect on every hon. and right hon. Member, by concerned constituents urging an amendment to include sentient creatures in the Bill. It was quite difficult to face that down, because of course we all believe that animals are sentient creatures. Indeed, the Animal Welfare Act 2006 makes that clear and goes well beyond the measures currently on the European Union’s statute book. Such amendments are unnecessary because they are declaratory and virtue signalling; and I believe that new clause 70, notwithstanding the technical flaws touched on by the Minister—I suspect those flaws would be remediable—is incorrect because it is declaratory. I very much respect the hon. Member for North Down, and it is with great regret that I will not be able to support the amendment this evening.

4.30 pm

There has been talk of a hard border, and there is not an hon. or right hon. Member in this Committee who does not wish to see the current incredibly boring border—boring is good in this context—continue. My Select Committee, the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, has visited the border area, and nothing much happens there. We want to see that continue. The good will is enormous, and there is a duty on this Government, on this House and, of course, on our interlocutors both in Dublin and in the European Union to ensure that it continues.

Indeed, the European Union has a duty under its own articles and treaties to ensure that happens. Both articles 8 and 21 of the Lisbon treaty require the European Union and its constituent members to work towards peace, concord and friendship between the European Union and third-party countries, which is of course where this country is heading after March 2019. That is not discretionary; the European Union is required to do so.

In underpinning the Good Friday agreement, we need to impress upon the European Union its obligations under its own treaties to ensure that the institutions that are being discussed today are enhanced and supported in every conceivable way. In the event that that level of support does not continue, we must insist on articles 8 and 21 of the Lisbon treaty.

Regulatory alignment, of course, is key to where we need to be, and it is a phase 2 piece of work. The sooner we get on to phase 2, the better. It is clear to me, a soft Brexiteer, that we need a fair level of regulatory and tariff alignment with the European Union. It is less clear to me, and less clear as every day goes by, that we have a sufficient market outwith the European Union at the moment to stop up any potential deficit we may have from leaving the European Union. I say that—the hon. Member for North Down will understand where I am coming from—with particular reference to what is happening with Boeing, which gives me little confidence in respect of the United States. That is highly pertinent to Bombardier and what is happening in north Belfast.

I am therefore led to conclude that, although I am a Brexiteer and wish to leave the European Union, we also need to have a deep and comprehensive free trade arrangement with the European Union. It is blindingly obvious that that requires regulatory alignment of some sort, and the only point of controversy is the definition of “regulatory alignment” and what it actually means. It is clear, and probably clearer this week than ever before, that regulation, tariff and technical alignment will have to be pretty comprehensive, at least for the foreseeable future. This week’s debate has perhaps served us well in reinforcing the importance of such alignment in the minds of those of us considering these matters, particularly those of us who might be characterised as soft Brexiteers.

I now conclude, except to say once again that I regret so very much that I will not be able to support the hon. Lady’s amendment this evening.

Mr McFadden: I rise to support new clause 70, tabled by the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon). Let me begin by paying tribute to her courage, and to her wonderful and moving speech at the start of this debate. The aim of the amendment is both simple and important: to place in the Bill the continuing importance of the Belfast or Good Friday agreement in the new post-Brexit context in which it will have to operate.

We have already seen the difficulties that contradictory red lines from the Government have caused; red lines on the single market, customs union and no border infrastructure have been jostling and competing with one another, producing the tensions we have seen this week. Fundamentally, this is a tension between two things. We can be part of a rule-based European-wide system, whatever language is used, be it “regulatory alignment”, “convergence” or some other form of words, in which case we keep the economic benefits from the UK and there is absolutely no need for a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Alternatively, we can make a decision to leave the system in its entirety, in which case we have different systems and regulations on either side, we have major consequences for our economy and we necessitate a border. We either have a border or we do not. It is not a negotiation—it is a decision. All the way through, this kind of decision will have to be confronted. If we get a deal and we get approval to move on to phase two of these negotiations in the coming days, this kind of decision will confront us more and more. Avoiding the decision and pretending it is not there or that we can simply pick and choose from what we like in both options is what produced the chaos and humiliation this week.

On the issue of the Good Friday agreement, the amendment seeks to ensure that any changes are only those arising directly as a consequence of the UK’s decision to leave the European Union. It therefore
places obligations on the Secretary of State and on Ministers in the devolved Assembly to act in line with the principles of the agreement. Those principles are hugely important. First and foremost was a rejection of violence and a commitment to exclusively peaceful means in the pursuit of political ends. Secondly, this was about consent. The agreement respects whatever choice the people of Northern Ireland make about their constitutional status and says

“it would be wrong to make any change in the status of Northern Ireland save with the consent of a majority of its people”.

That was hugely important, but the agreement is also a package. What it says about equality and the equal status of people from every community is very important.

Mr Cox rose—

Mr McFadden: We are under some time pressure, so I would rather continue.

The agreement is also important in what it says about identity, and I wish to stress this point. It gets to the heart of the old problem that dogged Northern Ireland politics, which was the view that if one community gained, the other had necessarily lost. The tyranny of identity politics can be that it forces people to choose between multiple and overlapping identities—are they one thing or the other? When it comes to identity, the genius of the Good Friday agreement is that it does not force people to choose. Instead, it talks of

“the birthright of all the people of Northern Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British, or both”.

Let us not forget the “or both”, as it is very important. It gives everyone in Northern Ireland an equal status and a legitimate sense of belonging.

Mr Cox rose—

Mr McFadden: I am going to continue. The point about identity is crucial, because we have to understand that the Good Friday agreement’s effects were not just economic or governmental, but profoundly psychological. By enshrining these principles, the agreement turned a page. The great danger is that Brexit is seen as going back, and we must not go back in any sense of the term. So if hon. Members want to know why the amendment is important and why it is necessary, I say to them that that is why it is necessary. It is because we must hold dear to these principles in a new political context, where, for the first time in history, one country is going to be outside the European Union and its neighbour is going to be inside it. We have never had that before.

When the agreement was signed, it was different: both countries were members of the European Union. Twenty years on, we must guard against any complacency that would see the agreement as a 20-year-old document that can simply be put aside. The agreement was the basis for a new normality, which has not only saved many, many lives—although it certainly has done—but led to a new normality in trade, in relations between the UK and Ireland, and in relationships within Northern Ireland and on both sides of the border. There is peace, but it must not be taken for granted, be treated harshly or be subject to complacency. Great care must be taken.

The Minister and Government Members have, essentially, put forward two arguments for not accepting the new clause: first, that it is technically flawed and, secondly, that it is declaratory and does not add anything. Both those things cannot be true. The truth is that if the Minister wanted to avoid a vote tonight, he should have accepted the new clause. That would have shown that he was willing to legislate for what he said at the Dispatch Box.

The excuses he has given for not accepting it are out of the standard book of Ministers’ excuses for not accepting amendments. He said, “I agree with the sentiment, but it is technically flawed. I will give the hon. Member a meeting.” Ministers have been standing at that Dispatch Box saying that kind of thing for decades. The truth is that if he wants to avoid a vote, he has to go much further and guarantee that he will legislate to put in the Bill a commitment to the Good Friday agreement in the new post-Brexit context in which it will have to operate. By doing that, he would be making a statement confirming that we hold dear to the beliefs enshrined in the agreement.

I return to the question of identity. Those in Northern Ireland should be able to choose freely to be British or Irish or both. Brexit must not become a divisive wall that separates those identities. It must not mean losing those all-important words “or both”, and all the beneficial consequences that have come from them.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I remind everybody that there are still 12 speakers to go.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): I apologise to you, Mr Hoyle, and to the Committee, for slipping out at a critical moment and missing part of the Minister’s speech. I wish to address new clause 70, moved by the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon). I wholly sympathise with the sentiments she expressed. I worked on Merseyside through the ‘80s and ‘90s, and I remember the bomb scares and the real horror. We did huge trade buying hides in Northern Ireland and southern Ireland, and I remember just how difficult and grim it was. I totally sympathise with all those who lived through it. I wholly concur with the hon. Lady’s tribute to her sadly late husband and all those in the Royal Ulster Constabulary, the security forces, the British Army—I proudly wear the wristband of the Royal Irish, which is stationed in my constituency and represents Irish men and women from every single one of the 32 counties—and the Ulster Defence Regiment who held the peace. Under intense, miserable provocation and terrorism, they enabled the peace process to take place.

It is worth remembering that there was extraordinary bipartisan unity in the House. John Major’s Government took some hideously difficult decisions, including to start talks while terrorism was still being conducted. The Labour party under Tony Blair took up the process, and that resulted in the Belfast agreement, but do not forget the bipartisan support in Dublin and Washington. It was the absolute unity among the two main parties in the three capitals that helped to bring about the peace. We have to pay tribute to all the local players who also had to swallow hugely difficult decisions. I pay particular tribute to Lord Trimble, who brought about the agreement.

It is at this stage that I shall mention the European Union. As the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) mentioned, the European Union is mentioned only twice in the Belfast agreement—first in the preamble and then in article 17 in a quick mention about the North South Ministerial Council. Obviously, the European Union has been supportive. There has
been significant peace money. In the Government’s position paper, it is clear that that peace money could be continued after 2020.

4.45 pm

I can wholly sympathise with the hon. Lady’s new clause. I started my involvement with Northern Ireland 10 years ago. I was the shadow Secretary of State. The agreement had gone through and I made it my business to go every single week. If I missed a week, I would double up the following week. For three years, therefore, I went every week. I then became the real Secretary of State, which was a huge honour, and carried on the work of my predecessor, Shaun Woodward. Devolution of policing and justice had gone through and we carried that on. The first decision that we had to make was to publish the Saville report. On day one, I told my civil servants, “We will publish it as rapidly as possible, in as good order as possible.”

Therefore, this party wholeheartedly participated. We began that under John Major. In opposition, we supported the Labour party and we carried on with that in the coalition Government, of which I was proud to be a part. Therefore, no one should be in any doubt about the strength of our unity. The hon. Member for Gedling [Mr Clarke] and I took part in a broadcast this morning together, and there really was not much that we disagreed about, except that he would like to stay in the European Union and I am looking forward to leaving it.

In some ways, the sentiment of the hon. Lady’s new clause is absolutely held across the House. I have some sympathy with the comments of my right hon. and learned Friend, who knows considerably more about the law than me, it does seem to me to be justiciable and, given the deliberate ambiguities of the text of the Belfast agreement, which we all understand the reasons for, it seems to me that subsection (5), which gives immense breadth of decision making to a judge to decide what is in accordance with the Belfast principles, does not permit the Northern Ireland Assembly to do anything which is not in accordance with the Belfast principles.

I am wholly in sympathy with what the hon. Lady has proposed and I strongly support the proposal of my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry)—sadly, she is not in her seat; she would probably like to hear of that support. I came into the Chamber in the middle of the Minister’s comments. He was being very emollient. He should sit down with the hon. Lady and just see whether, by Report, we could not work into the text some mention of the Belfast agreement that is not justiciable.

Mr Cox: My right hon. Friend might well reflect on the fact that section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 creates quite a complex but rather delicate mechanism for the enforcement of many of the Belfast agreement principles. It does not put it on a court, but on the Equality Commission, and the Secretary of State is at the apex, the decision maker, and decides whether or not a public authority is obeying the principles of equality in the Belfast agreement. If this new clause is introduced into Northern Ireland’s law, it will unquestionably create a situation of complex uncertainty as to how it sits with the Northern Ireland Act.

Mr Paterson: I am grateful that my hon. and learned Friend, who knows considerably more about the law than me, concurs with my comments that this new clause could be justiciable. On those grounds, I will not be supporting the hon. Lady’s new clause, but I hope that she has a satisfactory meeting with the Minister.

I am more concerned about the promise in the Prime Minister’s article 50 letter—it was in the position paper published in the summer—about the border:

“We want to avoid a return to a hard border between our two countries, to be able to maintain the Common Travel Area between us, and to make sure that the UK’s withdrawal from the EU does not harm the Republic of Ireland.”

That is absolutely spot on. As I see it, the real risk to the Belfast agreement comes from some of the developments over the course of this week. As the customs paper said in the summer, the border issue is soluble with technical measures. If we look at the figures: of Northern Ireland’s sales, 66% stay in Northern Ireland and 21% go to Great Britain. Therefore, 87% are within the UK—the single market of the UK. Only 5% of Northern Ireland’s sales go south of the border to the Republic of Ireland. Going the other way, only 1.6% of the Republic of Ireland’s exports go north over the border. That is according to the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency.

I am concerned that the issue of the border is being blown up out of all proportion in relation to the size of the problem. There is a border today—a currency, tax and excise duty border. It is a tax point; it is not a customs inspection border. The Government’s position paper, published in the summer, includes proposals such as electronic invoicing, authorised economic operators, and derogation for small businesses in the border area. “Farming Today” this morning reported that the majority of Northern Ireland’s milk goes to dairies in the Republic. It is milk from the same farmer in the same tanker on the same road and with same destination every day. The situation is manageable with modern technology and good will on both sides.

I know some members of the Irish Government. I went there regularly as the shadow Secretary of State and very regularly as the real Secretary of State. When I was Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, I worked closely with Simon Coveney, who I am delighted is the Tánaiste. He is a thoroughly practical and effective politician, who got a grip on the common agricultural policy around the time that Ireland had the presidency of the Council of the European Union, and drove the reform through with real determination.

I really hope that, with good will, the issue of the border can be settled. A hard border is completely impractical. It cannot work. Nobody wants it on either side. The problem can be resolved. The issue that blew up earlier this week is that there can be no difference in regulation between one part of the United Kingdom and another. Any change in regulation has to pertain to every part, including Northern Ireland, to keep the integrity of the United Kingdom.
The Chairman of Ways and Means (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): We have 11 speakers left, with something like 20 minutes to go. It is just not going to happen if this continues.

Tom Brake: Unfortunately, I do not share the optimism of the right hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson) about how easy it will be not to have a border between Ireland and Northern Ireland.

I will park Liberal Democrat amendments 144 and 147 on the basis that new clause 70 seeks, perhaps more effectively than my amendments, to ensure that the Good Friday agreement is honoured. Therefore, if the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) seeks to push her new clause to a vote, she could also have me as a Teller. I am not sure of the collective noun for Tellers, but a troop of Tellers would be available to her.

The hon. Lady illustrated, in a moving speech, the importance of the Good Friday agreement and ensuring that it is not damaged in any way. She did that with great credibility. She said that the impact of no deal on Northern Ireland could be catastrophic, reckless and dangerous. I was pleased to hear about her legal expertise in relation to the European Union. Now, she may not have heard this because she was on her feet at the time, but one of the DUP Members—I think it was the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell), who is no longer in his place—said, from a sedentary position, “That explains a lot.” I am sure that the hon. Member for East Londonderry will not mind me mentioning that because he meant, of course, that it explains why the hon. Member for North Down has as much in-depth legal knowledge about the European Union as she was clearly demonstrating in the debate. I am sure that the comment was not intended to be disrespectful. The hon. Lady has, indeed, set out her expertise in this matter during many debates in this place.

The hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) mentioned the role that the Scottish and Welsh Governments have played in engaging all parties in the process of drawing up amendments. I am aware of that and I very much welcome it. I agree with him entirely that that is something that, unfortunately, is not being reciprocated by our Government in this place. I made a very generous offer to the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union. I said that I would sit down with him and go through the Liberal Democrat amendments, because I was sure that they could help him in seeking to achieve some improvements to the Bill. I made that generous offer on 24 October, but I am still waiting for a reply. If the Government want to engage, the willingness is there; they just need to respond positively.

The Minister said that the Government are very committed to the Good Friday agreement. I take him at his word—he is a Minister who says what he means and means what he says. I am not sure I can say that for all the other Members on the Government Front Bench. He could demonstrate that simply by putting it on the face of the Bill. Perhaps that is declaratory, but we often make declaratory legislation in this place. The commitment to 0.7% of gross national income for international development is perhaps an example of declaratory legislation that Members support.

I listened carefully to the Minister. I will support the hon. Member for North Down if she presses the new clause to a Division. One thing is certain: whether or not the European Union is mentioned or referred to in the Good Friday agreement, it is very clear that what the Government do in relation to the border between Ireland and Northern Ireland has a heavy bearing on the stability of Northern Ireland, the peace and prosperity that it has experienced in recent years. I will not press my amendments to a vote.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): I echo many of my colleagues when I say that as we leave the European Union, our main goal must be to ensure that we leave in an orderly manner, with minimal disruption to businesses and individuals. Like the rest of the Bill, clause 10 and schedule 2 work to achieve that aim. Quite simply, like clause 11, they make sure that there is no scope for the UK Government or any of the devolved Administrations to make changes that lead to the four nations of the Union diverging from each other. Such divergence would damage the internal market of the United Kingdom; although that sounds abstract, in practice it means new pointless barriers being erected that make it more difficult and expensive for trade between the four nations to take place. That market is worth billions of pounds in exports to businesses right across Scotland.

The chaos of such divergence must be avoided. That is why I oppose the various amendments to clause 10 and schedule 2 that seek to increase the delegated powers of the devolved Administrations. There is no power grab in the Bill, just common sense. However, it is important that the devolved Administrations have appropriate delegated powers to correct legislation to ensure that it continues to function after Brexit. Maintaining the statute book and minimising disruption is the entire point of the Bill, after all.

Giving delegated powers to the devolved Administrations is a necessary consequence of our devolution settlement and of the fact that—much like here in Westminster—in Holyrood, Cardiff Bay and, in time, Stormont, the changes that need to be made cannot be made just by primary legislation. As the Minister stated, it is important that the devolved Administrations’ powers are substantial enough for them to be able to make the right tweaks, rather than feeling unable to do anything more than make bare-bones tweaks that leave the statute book barely functioning. We want a fully functioning statute book after Brexit, not a barely functioning one.

I therefore oppose the amendments that aim to restrict the delegated powers of the devolved Administrations. It is right that the Administrations should be able to make tweaks as they deem “appropriate” and not be restricted to a tighter definition of what is “necessary”.

I suspect that when we revisit the Bill on Report, we will have a much clearer idea of exactly what powers will be devolved to the Scottish Parliament and the other devolved legislatures after Brexit. I look forward to another great devolution of powers under a strong Conservative UK Government. SNP Members must remember that just because we support the Union, it does not mean that we oppose devolution. Quite simply, it patronises the majority of Scots who voted to remain part of the United Kingdom to suggest otherwise.

We need the UK Government and the Scottish Government to work constructively together. I hope that we will soon see progress on common frameworks and an agreement on how we can best preserve our most important internal market—our United Kingdom.
Martin Docherty-Hughes: While I of course support the amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins), I will address my speech that they con. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon), who is no longer in her place.

The issues of Ireland and the Good Friday agreement and its relevance to the people who live in the border areas are of genuine personal interest to me and to many of my constituents. It would not have been that long ago that my late grandfather would have walked from Convoy into Strabane. Back then there was no border, and none of us would ever want to go back to the border that came in during those intervening years.

5 pm

I have often held true to the words from section 2 of the amended Ireland Act 1949, which states that “notwithstanding that the Republic of Ireland is not part of His Majesty's dominions, the Republic of Ireland is not a foreign country for the purposes of any law in force in any part of the United Kingdom”.

That generous and rather apt opening sentiment could, given the historical background, have been phrased so very differently. It is an idea that resonates today, not only because it provides a useful model for an amicable and considered separation of two nations, but because contained within it is the very kernel of the idea which has shaped the recent history of UK-Irish relations. It also helps to consider that the special status offered to Ireland has been acknowledged and accepted by its European Union partners. States who could use that idea to leverage a better deal for their own citizens—Poland or Lithuania, say—have understood that it is a relationship that must endure.

I think we can all agree that Monday’s events were pretty remarkable even by the standards of the recent Brexit madness. As I travelled from home to Westminster at the beginning of the week, it was already an outlandish tale. When I eventually reached Westminster and looked at my phone, it had reached unprecedented heights. Most astonishing, though, is the fact that any of this is a surprise to anyone. How did Her Majesty’s Government think they could pull a fast one on some of the best negotiators in Europe—the Democratic Unionist party? Why was it a surprise that Ireland is no longer a country of 3 million people but part of a larger political union of 500 million to which it owed significant solidarity? How on earth did anyone think that the issue of the Irish border, so enveloped in broader issues of identity and politics that have shaped not only Irish history but the history of these entire islands, was somehow going to be straightforward?

At the beginning of this year, I, together with other Members, was fortunate to be part of a delegation arranged by CHAMP—an excellent organisation that promotes cross-border and cross-community projects—to visit the Oireachtais Éireann, where we were fortunate enough to meet not only An Taoiseach but representatives from all of the parties there. They raised issues that have resonance today. The one thing that stood out most of all for me—I am sure that the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn), who is chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Ireland and the Irish in Britain, of which I am a vice-chair, will share this feeling—was the deep knowledge, understanding and respect that all those men and women had for the United Kingdom.

These were people whose cultural references were similar to our own, and who quoted The Guardian, The Daily Telegraph or “Newsnight” when talking about current events. They were following the latest Brexit developments from these news sources, and they were telling us exactly what was going to happen: namely, that the Republic of Ireland took its obligations under the Good Friday agreement very seriously and was amazed that the United Kingdom Government seemingly—I stress “seemingly”—did not. Outside the Legatum-ist concepts of technology-driven or “frictionless” border solutions, the reality was that any sort of border was going to cause real problems. There was great sadness that the period of widening and deepening of UK-Irish relations since the Good Friday agreement could now be at an end. It gives me no pleasure to note that they were right.

I was lucky to meet the then Taoiseach in his office. He pointed to the chair where Her Majesty the Queen sat in that lime-green dress and had charmed her hosts, and had made even the most ardent republican—I would include myself—marvel at the soft power that the monarchy confers. That visit had seen her drink tea not only with the Taoiseach but with people who had attempted to kill, and had killed, close members of her own family; people who had waged a war across the isle of Ireland and into England; people who no one would have blamed her for not wanting to break bread with—yet she did. She did it because she knew it was the right thing to do, because the image of the woman whose portrait hung resplendently in many of the schools, churches, even Orange lodges and golf clubs of Unionist Ireland taking tea with those who had wanted her dead not much more than a decade ago was more powerful than any other; because there was a shared future on these islands, based on mutual respect.

In conclusion, those who do not know the history of our joined history are doomed to repeat it. I am drawing to a close, but I shall show Members the last book I took out from the great Library of the House of Commons: Beckett’s history of modern Ireland from 1603 to 1923. It was published in the 1960s, and it seems that I am the only person to have read that copy so far. I again commend the hon. Member for North Down, and I hope that the Committee supports her and the entire community of Northern Ireland by voting with her.

Luke Graham: I am aware of time restrictions, Mr Hoyle, so I will not take any interventions. I shall speak to amendments 174 and 169. It will come as no surprise to hon. Members that I do not support amendment 174 and other amendments tabled by Scottish National party Members. The reason for my opposition, and my party’s opposition, to those amendments is that they expand powers to amend directly applicable EU law, undermining the proposed UK frameworks that the devolved Administrations indicated that they favoured.

I may be new to the Commons, but devolution is even younger than I am. Although it is still evolving, the Bill and subsequent Bills will provide us with a real opportunity to progress the discussion and the devolution settlement. I want to make one or two points very clear, as they have been raised by Opposition Members. No Government Member is threatening the permanence of any devolved institution. In fact, any change would have to come to the Commons, where Members represent Scottish, Welsh,
English and Irish constituencies. We will make sure that any change goes through the House and is subject to scrutiny.

Finally, devolved consent and operation are not necessarily better. I suggest that Members look at the SNP Administration in Edinburgh, and the performance on education and health—devolution does not always produce better results. Devolved legislatures are not models of efficiency. The Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh was starved of legislation for over six months last year, and it spent more time debating Brexit and international affairs, which are reserved, than education, justice and health combined, which are explicitly devolved.

Several hon. Members rose—

Luke Graham: I am sorry, I am completely out of time. [Interruption.] It is completely true; those are facts. One thing that has been made clear—

Several hon. Members rose—

Luke Graham: I said that I would not take interventions; I am really sorry, as I usually would. What has been made clear by Members across the House—

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab) rose—

Luke Graham: I am sorry, I am not going to give way to the hon. Lady, who arrived late. The hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) spoke powerfully about the sacrifice and dedication of many people to the United Kingdom. Opposition Members did not only hear her words but understood them. I hope that most Members, with some exceptions, want us to be committed to the United Kingdom and want amendments to the Bill to strengthen it, both in devolved and reserved matters, so we had better serve our constituents and not political dogma.

Conor McGinn: I thank my hon. Friend for giving me the opportunity to respond to his remarks. I am an MP from Northern Ireland, but not a Northern Ireland MP, which makes speaking in debates such as this one rather peculiar, because everyone from Northern Ireland has a background or perceived affiliation. I find, when I say something that nationalists agree with, that they say, “Well, he hasn’t forgotten where he has come from.” When I say something with which they disagree, they say, “He should be ashamed of himself, given where he has come from.” Similarly with Unionists, when I say something with which they agree, they say, “Fair play to him, given where he is from.” When I say something with which they disagree, they say, “Well, what would you expect?” I have a knack of annoying everyone, which I hope to continue in the two minutes available to me.

I want to make a couple of quick substantive points, then say something about the Good Friday agreement. First, the only people seeking to change the border, or who have proposed a fundamental change to the border, are those who propose that we leave the single market and the customs union. It was the UK Government who fundamentally altered the nature of the border when they suggested that, not the Irish Government. The principle of consent is firmly enshrined: Northern Ireland will remain part of the United Kingdom until the majority of the people there decide otherwise. Notwithstanding that, there is a unique position, because people born in Northern Ireland have a right to Irish citizenship by virtue of their birth there. My constituents in St Helens do not have a right to be Irish because they are born in St Helens, nor do people in Manchester, Birmingham, Glasgow or Cardiff.

Jenny Chapman: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way at this late stage. Like him, I am deeply disappointed by the Government’s inadequate response to arguments made today to protect the Good Friday agreement. I am also disappointed that they appear to be prepared to risk a vote that could be perceived as challenging bipartisan support for the agreement, but we are not prepared to do that, so we will not seek to divide the Committee. I thought my hon. Friend should know that before he continues.

Conor McGinn: I thank my hon. Friend for that; the position is very strong and very clear.

The legacy of the peace process is not a Labour legacy; it is a legacy shared between us all. I hope that the Conservative party will reflect on that in these debates, and I am disappointed that the Government have not accepted the new clause today. It is disingenuous to say that the European Union is not mentioned in the Good Friday agreement. Its writ runs through the Good Friday agreement, which was predicated on the basis that we would both remain members of the European Union, and around strand 2, which is north-south co-operation, and strand 3, on east-west co-operation, it is mentioned specifically in terms of areas we can discuss, and there are shared competences.

I want also to remind the Committee that although we talk a lot about the referendum to leave the European Union and its result, the Good Friday agreement was passed by referendums on both parts of the island of Ireland by a majority of people exercising their democratic right. We need to respect that referendum as well as the referendum on the European Union.

The debate focuses primarily and largely on trade, tariff and regulatory alignment. The Good Friday agreement and the peace process are much more than that. I said in this House in my maiden speech that there was no contradiction in being British and Irish, or to having feelings of loyalty, affinity and affection for both countries. That is being tested by this process, but I stand by it. I plead with the Government: through this Brexit process, do not make people choose.

Lady Hermon: This has been a wonderful debate, and I greatly appreciate the contributions from all sides, even when they disagreed with new clause 70 and even when they were made by Members of the DUP who disagreed with new clause 70. Despite my disappointment, which is real, and that of other Members, the greater objective is to maintain the Good Friday agreement and its respect and integrity, and to ensure that we do nothing in this House that gives succour to dissident republicans or increases the risk of terrorism. I will therefore not press the new clause to a vote.

I will, however, accept the very nice invitation to tea with the Minister, but I do not just want tea and buns. I want a commitment from him now—I want him to intervene on me—that the Good Friday agreement will be preserved in some other form, if not today.

Mr Robin Walker: I give the hon. Lady that commitment. The Good Friday agreement is an absolute commitment that we stand by and it will be preserved. I will work
with the hon. Lady, as I have been invited to do, to ensure that through the whole of the process we deliver on the principles.

**Lady Hermon:** I will take that as a commitment that at tea we will agree that the Good Friday agreement will be written into the next Bill—perhaps the withdrawal Bill. The Minister just has to nod.

**Mr Walker:** As I said to the hon. Lady in the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, we are in the process of negotiating the withdrawal agreement and therefore we cannot pre-empt the detail of the Bill. Clearly, we want to enshrine the principles in the withdrawal agreement and that Bill will legislate for that. There is a logic to what she says and I am happy to follow up and discuss it further.

**Lady Hermon:** With that, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the new clause.

Clause, by leave, withdrawn.

**Clause 10 ordered to stand part of the Bill.**

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**Schedule 2**

**CORRESPONDING POWERS INVOLVING DEVOLVED AUTHORITIES**

**Amendment proposed:** 167, page 17, line 9, at end insert—

“(3) This paragraph does not apply to regulations made under this Part by the Scottish Ministers or the Welsh Ministers.”—(Stephen Gethins.)

**This amendment would provide that the power of the Scottish Ministers and the Welsh Ministers to make regulations under Part 1 of Schedule 2 extends to amending directly applicable EU law incorporated into UK law, in line with a Minister of the Crown’s power in Clause 7.”**

**Question put,** That the amendment be made.

The Committee divided: Ayes 296, Noes 316.

**Division No. 57**

[5.14 pm]

**AYES**

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniassi, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Brade, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Bray, James
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chapman, Douglas
Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Chwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowen, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Crawley, Angela
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummings, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Davey, rh Sir Edward
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martyn
De Cordova, Marsha
De Piero, Gloria
Debono, Thangam
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Farron, Tim
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Fynn, Paul
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frith, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hardy, Emma
Harman, Maha Sa Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Mr Mark
Hendry, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hermon, Lady
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Holmann, Kate
Hopkins, Kevin
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Kilren, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Lee, Ms Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCarty, Kenny
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonagh, Andy
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
European Union (Withdrawal) Bill 6 DECEMBER 2017 European Union (Withdrawal) Bill

Barclay, Stephen Baldwin, Harriett Badenoch, Mrs Kemi Bacon, Mr Richard Atkins, Victoria Bacon, Mr Richard Badenoch, Mrs Kemi Baker, Mr Steve Baldwin, Harriett Barclay, Stephen Sheppard, Tommy Sherriff, Paula Shuker, Mr Gavin Siddiq, Tulp Skinner, Mr Dennis Slaughter, Andy Smeth, Ruth Smith, Angela Smith, Cat Smith, Eleanor Smith, Jeff Smith, Laura Smith, Nick Smith, Owen Smyth, Karin Snell, Gareth Sobel, Alex Spellar, rh John Starmer, rh Keir Stephens, Chris Stevens, Jo Stone, Jamie Streeting, Wes Sweetney, Mr Paul Swinson, Jo Tami, Mharry Thewliss, Alison Thomas, Gareth Thomas-Symonds, Nick Thornberry, rh Emily Timms, rh Stephen Trickett, Jon Turner, Karl Twigg, Davey Twigg, Stephen Twist, Liz Umnuna, Chuka Vaz, Valerie Walker, Thelma Watson, Tom West, Catherine Westminster, Matt Whitehead, Dr Alan Whitfield, Martin Whittord, Dr Philippa Williams, Hywel Williams, Dr Paul Williamson, Chris Wilson, Phil Wishart, Pete Woodcock, John Yasin, Mohammad

Tellers for the Ayes:

David Linden and Kirsty Blackman

Adams, Nigel Afuoli, Bim Afriyie, Adam Aaldous, Peter Allain, Lucy Andrew, Stuart Arger, Edward Atkins, Victoria Bacon, Mr Richard Badenoch, Mrs Kemi Baker, Mr Steve Baldwin, Harriett Barclay, Stephen Bradley, rh Karen Brady, Mr Graham Breerton, Jack Bridgen, Andrew Brine, Steve Brokenshire, rh James Bruce, Fiona Buckland, Robert Burnham, Alex Burns, Conor Burt, rh Alistair Cairns, rh Alun Campbell, Mr Gregory Cartlidge, James Cash, Sir William Caufield, Maria Chalk, Alex Chisholm, Rehman Chope, Mr Christopher Churchill, Jo Clark, Colin Clark, rh Greg Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth Clarke, Mr Simon Cleverly, James Coffey, Dr Thérèse Collins, Damian Costa, Alberto Courts, Robert Cox, Mr Geoffrey Crabbe, rh Stephen Crouch, Tracey Davies, Chris Davies, David T. C. Davies, Glyn Davies, Mims Davies, Philip Davis, rh Mr David Dinenage, Caroline Djanogly, Mr Jonathan Docherty, Leo Dodds, rh Nigel Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M. Donelan, Michelle Dorries, Miss Nadine Double, Steve Dowden, Oliver Doyle-Price, Jackie Drax, Richard Dugdridge, James Duguid, David Duncan, rh Sir Alan Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain Dunne, Mr Philip Ellis, Michael Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias Elphicke, Charlie Eustice, George Evans, Mr Nigel Evennett, rh David Fabricant, Michael Fallon, rh Sir Michael Fernandes, Suella Field, rh Mark Ford, Vicky Foster, Kevin Fox, rh Dr Liam Francois, rh Mr Mark Fraser, Lucy Freeman, George Fysh, Mr Marcus Garnier, Mark Gauke, rh Mr David Ghani, Ms Nusrat Gibb, rh Nick Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl Girvan, Paul Glen, John Goldsmith, Zac Goodwill, Mr Robert Gove, rh Michael Graham, Luke Graham, Richard Grant, Bill Grant, Mrs Helen Gray, James Grayling, rh Chris Green, Chris Green, rh Damian Greening, rh Justine Grieve, rh Mr Dominic Griffiths, Andrew Gyimah, Mr Sam Hain, Kate Hannon, rh Robert Hall, Luke Hammond, rh Mr Philip Hammond, Stephen Hancock, rh Matt Hands, rh Greg Harper, rh Mr Mark Harrington, Richard Harri, Trudy Hart, Simon Hayes, mr rh John Heald, rh Sir Oliver Heappey, James Heaton-Harris, Chris Heaton-Jones, Peter Henderson, Gordon Herbert, rh Nick Hinds, Damian Hoare, Simon Hollingbery, George Hollinrake, Kevin Hollobone, Mr Philip Holloway, Adam Howell, John Huddleston, Nigel Hughes, Eddie Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy Hurd, Mr Nick Jack, Mr Alister James, Margot Javid, rh Sajid Jayawardena, Mr Ranil Jenkin, Mr Bernard Jenwick, Robert Johnson, rh Boris Johnson, Dr Caroline Johnson, Gareth Johnson, Joseph Jones, Andrew Jones, rh Mr David Jones, Mr Marcus Kawczynski, Daniel Keeghan, Gillian Kennedy, Seema Kerr, Stephen Knight, rh Sir Greg Knight, julian Kwarteng, Kwasi Lamont, John
Lancaster, Mark  
Latham, Mrs Pauline  
Leadsom, rh Andrea  
Lee, Dr Phillip  
Lefroy, Jeremy  
Leigh, Sir Edward  
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver  
Lewer, Andrew  
Lewis, rh Brandon  
Lewin, rh Dr Julian  
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian  
Liddington, rh Mr David  
Little Pengelly, Emma  
Lopez, Julia  
Lopresti, Jack  
Lord, Mr Jonathan  
Loughton, Tim  
Macinlay, Craig  
Maclean, Rachel  
Main, Mrs Anne  
Mak, Alan  
Malthouse, Kit  
Mann, Scott  
Masterton, Paul  
Maynard, Paul  
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick  
McParland, Stephen  
McVey, rh Ms Esther  
Menzies, Mark  
Mercer, Johnny  
Merriman, Huw  
Metcalfe, Stephen  
Miller, rh Mrs Maria  
Milling, Amanda  
Mills, Nigel  
Milton, rh Anne  
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew  
Moore, Damien  
Mordaunt, rh Penny  
Morgan, rh Nicky  
Morris, Anne Marie  
Morris, David  
Morris, James  
Morton, Wendy  
Mundell, rh David  
Murray, Mrs Sheryll  
Murnin, Dr Andrew  
Neill, Robert  
Newton, Sarah  
Nokes, Caroline  
Norman, Jesse  
Offord, Dr Matthew  
Opperman, Guy  
Paisley, Ian  
Parish, Neil  
Patterson, rh Mr Owen  
Pawsey, Mark  
Penning, rh Sir Mike  
Penrose, John  
Percy, Andrew  
Perry, Claire  
Philp, Chris  
Pincher, Christopher  
Pow, Rebecca  
Prentis, Victoria  
Prisk, Mr Mark  
Pritchard, Mark  
Pursglove, Tom  
Quin, Jeremy  
Quince, Will  
Raab, Dominic  
Redwood, rh John  
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob  
Robertson, Mr Laurence  
Robinson, Gavin  
Robinson, Mary  
Rosindell, Andrew  
Ross, Douglas  
Rowley, Lee  
Rudd, rh Amber  
Rutley, David  
Sandbach, Antoinette  
Scully, Paul  
Seely, Mr Bob  
Selous, Andrew  
Shannon, Jim  
Shapps, rh Grant  
Sharma, Alpesh  
Shelbrooke, Alec  
Simpson, David  
Simpson, rh Mr Keith  
Skidmore, Chris  
Smith, Chloe  
Smith, Henry  
Smith, rh Julian  
Smith, Robert  
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas  
Souby, rh Anna  
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline  
Spencer, Mark  
Stephenson, Andrew  
Stevenson, John  
Stewart, Bob  
Stewart, Iain  
Stewart, Rory  
Stride, rh Mel  
Stuart, Graham  
Sturdy, Julian  
Sunak, Rishi  
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond  
Sym, Mr Robert  
Thomas, Derek  
Thomson, Ross  
Throup, Maggie  
Tohill, Kelly  
Tomlinson, Justin  
Tomlinson, Michael  
Tracey, Craig  
Tredinnick, David  
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie  
Truss, rh Elizabeth  
Tugendhat, Tom  
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward  
Vickers, Martin  
Villiers, rh Theresa  
Walker, Mr Charles  
Waller, Robin  
Wallace, rh Mr Ben  
Warburton, David  
Warman, Matt  
Watling, Giles  
Whately, Helen  
Wheeler, Mrs Heather  
Whittaker, Craig  
Whittingdale, rh Mr John  
Wiggin, Bill  
Williamson, rh Gavin  
Wilson, Sammy  
Wollaston, Dr Sarah  
Wood, Mike  
Wragg, Mr William  
Wright, rh Jeremy  
Zahawi, Nadhim  

Tellers for the Noes:  
Mike Freer and  
Rebecca Harris

Question accordingly negatived.

5.30 pm

More than four hours having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings, the proceedings were interrupted (Programme Order, 11 September).

The Chair put forthwith the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Standing Order No. 83D).

Schedule 2 agreed to.

New Clause 17

WITHDRAWAL AGREEMENT PAYMENT TO THE EUROPEAN UNION

“Nothing in section 12 of this Act shall be taken to permit a Minister of the Crown, government department or devolved authority to pay out of money provided by Parliament expenditure in relation to a settlement in respect of the making of a withdrawal agreement with the European Union unless a draft of the instrument authorising that payment has been laid before, and approved by a resolution of the House of Commons.”—(Mr Leslie.)

This new clause would ensure that the financial provision made in section 12 of this Act does not allow the Government to make a payment in settlement of the UK’s withdrawal from the European Union as part of a withdrawal agreement or new Treaty unless it has been expressly approved by the House of Commons.

Brought up, and read the First time.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

New clause 80—Transparency of the financial settlement—

1(1) Financial provision may be made for a financial settlement agreed as part of any withdrawal agreement under Article 50 of the Treaty of the European Union.

(2) Subsection 1 applies only if the financial settlement honours obligations incurred by the United Kingdom during the period of its membership of the EU.

(3) The Treasury must lay before both Houses of Parliament an estimate of the financial obligations incurred by the United Kingdom during the period of its membership of the EU, together with reports from the Office of Budget Responsibility, the National Audit Office and the Government Actuary each giving its independent assessment of the Treasury’s estimate.

(4) Any financial settlement payment to the European Union as part of a withdrawal agreement with the European Union must be made only in accordance with regulations made by a Minister of the Crown.

(5) Regulations under subsection (4) may be made only if a draft of the regulations has been laid before, and approved by resolution of, the House of Commons.”

This new clause ensures that any financial settlement as part of leaving the EU must reflect obligations incurred by the UK during its membership of the EU, must be transparent, and must be approved by Parliament.

Amendment 54, in clause 12, page 9, line 4, at end insert—

2(5) No payment shall be made to the European Union or its member states in respect of the making of a withdrawal agreement or a new Treaty with the European Union or any new settlement relating to arrangements that are to be made after exit
day unless a draft of the instrument authorising the payment has been laid before, and approved by a resolution of the House of Commons.”

This amendment would ensure that there is a vote in the House of Commons to approve any settlement payment agreed by Ministers as a consequence of negotiations on a withdrawal agreement or new Treaty with the European Union.

Clause 12 stand part.

Amendment 152, in schedule 4, page 32, line 35, leave out “(among other things)”.

This amendment would limit the scope of regulations modifying the levying of fees or charges by regulatory bodies to only the effects set out in sub-sub-paragraphs (a), (b) and (c).

Amendment 339, leave out lines 1 to 3.

This amendment would remove the power of public authorities to levy fees or charges via tertiary legislation.

Amendment 340, page 33, line 3, at end insert—

“(3A) Regulations under this paragraph may not be used to prescribe fees or charges that go beyond that which is necessary for recovering the direct cost of the provision of a service to the specific person (including any firm or individual) who is required to pay the relevant fee or charge.”

This amendment would prevent delegated powers from being used to levy taxes.

Amendment 153, page 35, line 8, at end insert—

“(3) Modification of subordinate legislation under sub-paragraph (2) may not be made for the purposes of—

(a) creating a fee or charge that does not replicate a fee or charge levied by an EU entity on exit day, or

(b) increasing a fee or charge to an amount larger than an amount charged by an EU entity for the performance of the relevant function on exit day.”

This amendment would prevent Ministers using the power for public bodies to alter fees and charges either to create a fee or charge that does not currently exist for the purposes of EU regulators, or to increase a UK charge to be higher than an existing EU fee or charge.

That schedule 4 be the Fourth schedule to the Bill.

Mr Leslie: New clause 17 relates to clause 12

[Interruption.]

The Temporary Chair (David Hanson): Order. Will Members leaving the Chamber please do so quietly so that the hon. Member for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie) can continue?

Mr Leslie: Clause 12 relates to the financial provisions of Brexit. New clause 17 seeks to clarify that a specific legislative instrument is needed to authorise payment in relation to a withdrawal agreement settlement and that that can be permitted only if approved by a resolution of the House of Commons.

It is important that we do not glide by some of the big aspects of Brexit. It has massive ramifications, one of which is the fabled “divorce bill” as it is sometimes characterised. Some people say that it is simply the settlement of obligations and liabilities, but phase 1 of the discussions, which the Government have agreed with Michel Barnier to conduct before we move on to phase 2 on the framework of future trade relations, has to include a financial settlement. It is therefore important that Members of Parliament understand it, approve it and enter into the arrangement with their eyes wide open.

We are not considering small sums of money. Last week, it was widely reported that the financial deal had been made, but we can never be absolutely sure about such reports. It was also reported that the Prime Minister had a deal with the Republic of Ireland and the rest of the EU on the Northern Ireland border, and we all know what happened to that in recent days. However, it feels as though Ministers, the European Commission and others have sort of agreed a financial settlement, so last week we tabled an urgent question to press the Government. The Chief Secretary to the Treasury responded to it, but unfortunately she was a bit coy about the divorce bill. We were not allowed to know how much it would be. We were told that it was still part and parcel of the negotiation process, and how dare we ask? We were also told that it was unreasonable of us to intrude on sensitive negotiating arrangements. It seemed peculiar to me that it was all right for the British Government to tell Michel Barnier, Jean-Claude Juncker and the European Commission how much HM Government and British taxpayers were prepared to pay, but somehow Members of Parliament, never mind the British public, were not grown up enough to know the real sum.

Ian Murray: It seems peculiar that, when we are supposed to be taking back control, the House has not been given any kind of figure that we can scrutinise. The only figure we have is £350 million a week for the NHS, which we know is a complete lie.

Mr Leslie: That was the surprise, and not just for us. Perhaps we were a bit cynical and did not expect the £350 million a week for the NHS on the side of the red bus to come to fruition, but I think that the British public were genuinely surprised when it turned out that, rather than Brexit’s giving us that fantastic dividend, it was actually going to cost us a considerable amount.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): It is not surprising that the public were surprised. We may have accepted that much of what was promised during the referendum might fall apart subsequently, but even after the event the Government were telling us a very different tale. My hon. Friend will remember being with me on the International Trade Committee when the Secretary of State came along and said, “I don’t expect us to pay anything to leave.” My constituents heard that said not just during the referendum, when they might expect to hear things that were somewhat fanciful, but many months later. The Government were saying, “We won’t be paying anything to leave.” What we are hearing now is very different.

Mr Leslie: It is worth listing the promises that were made to the British public in the run-up to the referendum, not just by Vote Leave but by individual Members of Parliament, including the Environment Secretary and the Foreign Secretary. On 22 June 2016 they wrote, on behalf of Vote Leave:

“We will take back control of our money”.

The International Trade Secretary said:

“Instead of handing over £350m a week to Brussels we should be spending that money on local priorities”,

such as the NHS.
I am delighted to see that the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) is present. He is very assiduous when it comes to these issues: I will grant him that. Before the referendum, he asked “How should we prepare for a potential no-deal Brexit?” It was suggested that riches would be available for our vital public services. Those were the promises that were made to the British public.

Stephen Doughty: Is it not all the more extraordinary that we are told not only that we will have to pay tens of billions as a divorce bill, but that the Chancellor has already put aside £3 billion—on top of the £750 million that has already been spent—just to cope with the costs of preparing for a potential no-deal Brexit?

Mr Leslie: We saw that £3.7 billion of supposed Brexit preparations in the Treasury Red Book at the time of the Budget, but I suspect that it is quite a modest sum. I know that there are former Chancellors of the Exchequer and others who have more experience than I do in this regard, but I think that those sums may have been set aside for a softer Brexit. If we ended up with a cliff edge with people saying, “We don’t need even a free trade agreement; we can cope on our own in a WTO scenario”, those Brexit preparation costs could be significantly higher.

Anna Soubry: The hon. Gentleman is making an extremely important point. Lots of people who had become really fed up and disaffected with politics and politicians took out their frustrations in the referendum. As the hon. Gentleman has said, many of them genuinely believed that if we left the European Union, there would be more money to be spent on our NHS. He is right: not only will we not have that money, but our economy could begin to retreat—and if we do not get a good deal but fall back on WTO rules, it undoubtedly will—and we will have to put aside, by way of example, £3 billion for Brexit, money that could have gone to the NHS. So my question to the hon. Gentleman is this—

The Temporary Chairman (David Hanson): Order. The intervention is too long.

Anna Soubry: May I just ask this question? Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the net benefits has been peace and prosperity across Europe?

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is very well informed and of course, as we know, very bright, so perhaps he can inform the Committee of the cumulative net cost of the EU—one our net payments over the last 42 years.

Mr Leslie: People have speculated that the net cost in terms of payments was about £10 billion a year, although some have said it was less, depending on how we look at it, but there is a cost to be paid for being a member of any club. We have to weigh against those fees and charges the benefits we get from being a member. If we are a member of a club and are gaining benefits from it, we have to ask whether the advantages outweigh the disadvantages and the benefits outweigh the costs. It is clear in terms of the wider economic expectations, and the Chancellor’s own assessments of what is going to happen to tax revenues in the future, that we are potentially going to be poorer as a result of some of the Brexit scenarios we are seeing.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the net benefits has been peace and prosperity across Europe?

Mr Leslie: Yes, it is true that the benefits are not simply financial. There are social benefits as well as economic benefits, and environmental benefits, and general welfare benefits that we have had in terms of the stability of the continent for such a prolonged period of time. Those benefits should not just be idly swept away; they should certainly be assessed, and the Cabinet should certainly be discussing them.

Dr Murrison: Not only is the hon. Gentleman very wise, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) pointed out, but he is also very fair. In the interests of fairness, and in the context of the point about the £350 million a week, does he accept that greatly exaggerated claims were made by right hon.
Members, some of whom remain in this House and some of whom are no longer in this House, about what would happen on day one after we voted to leave the EU? So far as I am aware, there have been no plagues of frogs and locusts, and the sky has not fallen in.

**Mr Leslie:** And we have not left the EU left. The hon. Gentleman makes the point that in any election or referendum campaign there are of course claims and counter-claims, but the success of the leave campaign has caused the situation we are now in, compounded by the choices made subsequently—the interpretations that were not on the ballot paper about sweeping away the single market and the customs union. These have led not to my assessment of what will happen to tax revenues, but to the hon. Gentleman’s own Chancellor of the Exchequer’s assessment. We can talk about our expectations during the campaign, but the hon. Gentleman must acknowledge that the public feel that a result was reached during the course of that referendum and they will look to those who advocated leave and think of the promises made at the time, and expect them to be fulfilled.

**Stephen Doughty:** We rightly debate all the figures, including the infamous £350 million on the side of the bus, but do we not also need to look at the real impact on the ground? The fact is that we are now having to recruit new customs and border officials to deal with the potential consequences of Brexit instead of spending Home Office budgets on new police officers.

**Mr Leslie:** Yes, there is a sense that the nation should be talking about how to tackle the massive challenges that we face—questions of productivity, of opportunities for young people and of the kind of healthcare improvements we can expect in the 21st century—but they have now been put on the back burner while we try to negotiate an inferior free trade arrangement to the one that we currently have. This is a kind of salvage operation.

**Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I am a new Member here, and most of the people around the House do not have a clue who I am, but as a new Member, I think I might bring a slightly fresher approach to the debate. Nobody in their right mind would sign a blank cheque for this amount of money, it’s nuts!

**Mr Leslie:** At the very least, we should know what we are being asked to pay. We know that the Foreign Secretary told the European Union to “go whistle”, and perhaps that is still the Government’s official policy. We also know that only in September the Brexit Secretary was saying that a figure of £50 billion was “nonsense”. Since then, of course, we have seen completely different reports. Parliament and the people deserve to know the sum involved. The idea of a blank cheque is completely unacceptable.

**Toby Perkins:** I am worried that my hon. Friend is not worried about the important point that he has just made about the impact assessments. There is a serious question about the competence of the Government if they have gone ahead with this without producing those assessments. There is a more important question, however. We as Members of Parliament were told that there were 58 documents that went into excruciating detail, but it now appears that that was not true. Amid all the talk about what happened outside this place, we must not forget the central point that the Secretary of State stood at the Dispatch Box and told us that those documents existed and that the Prime Minister had looked at a summary of them. He is now saying that those documents do not exist, so what he said was not true.

**Mr Leslie:** My hon. Friend’s anger about this is correct. For all the bonhomie and swagger of the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, this is unacceptable. He always has a cheeky little smile and a glint in his eye, but we should not let him off the hook. With all that bluster, he was saying, “Oh, don’t worry, there are oodles of detailed impact assessments but you must realise that they are commercially sensitive. We can’t possibly share them, but don’t worry, detailed impact assessments have been produced.” It now turns out that his bluff has been called, and when the curtain was pulled back we saw that those things did not exist, and he is now cycling away. Nobody expected this to be quite so threadbare.

**Tom Brake:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Mr Leslie:** I would like to make another point before I give way again.

This brings in the wider theme about sidelining Parliament and creating a sense that we should not have proper scrutiny of these issues. The new clause is about scrutiny, as is the debate going on in the Brexit Select Committee. It is also about the fact that sovereignty lies not in the hands of Ministers but in the hands of Parliament as the representatives of the people, and we need to do our job. The massive land grab of legislation, under the Henry VIII clauses in the Bill, is not acceptable. The cloak and dagger pretence about the impact assessments is not acceptable. Also, the idea that the divorce bill will be somehow covered over in some grubby hidden backroom negotiations, itemising only the textual liabilities rather than showing us the pounds, shillings and pence figures, is not acceptable.

**Chuka Umunna** (Stratham) (Lab): The new clause goes to the heart of the argument made for the UK leaving the European Union: this House would take back control. It was done in the name of parliamentary sovereignty. Does my hon. Friend not find it curious, therefore, that the Members who argued in the name of parliamentary sovereignty that we should leave—I see the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) nodding his head, so he agrees. He is an honourable gentleman, because he does believe in parliamentary sovereignty. Many hon. Members agree that the new clause is not about whether we believe in the single market or the customs union; it simply states that when the withdrawal agreement comes to fruition there needs to be a specific vote on the money, because
Mr Leslie: The hon. and learned Gentleman, who considers these matters in great detail, will understand that this matter relates to clause 12, which details financial provisions. Clearly it would be impossible for the Government to bring forward such a motion that did not have the clarity that the House expects. In my generosity, I drafted the new clause so as to make it as broad and flexible as possible. Any information would be better than no information. I know that he is urging me to be firmer with the Government on the issue—a manuscript amendment is always possible, so I look forward to that. Let us give the Government a chance to accept the new clause, because it is perfectly reasonable.

Mr Leslie: No, and of course we are talking about the divorce bill now, even though we have had no sight of it, because the Prime Minister is naturally anxious to move on from phase 1 to phase 2 of the talks. I almost feel sorry for her, because she is being pulled from pillar to post, with the hard Brexiteers wanting one thing and the DUP always yanking her chain in another way. The EU is of course a stickler when it comes to sufficient progress, but sufficient progress is what she wants to achieve, so she will give them a nod and say, “We will give you a divorce bill settlement, but please don’t publish how much it is, in case Parliament and the public find out.” If it is in the order of £67 billion, which is in the back of the OBR’s red book—I doubt it will be that high—that equates to £1,000 for every man, woman and child in this country. Members should just think about that when they are next in their constituencies: £1,000 for every single person they see will be part of that divorce bill.

Tom Brake: Does the hon. Gentleman believe, as I do, that the Government have managed to convince themselves that the EU is going to “go whistle” and that leaving will not cost us a penny because they get their information from too limited a number of sources? I do not know whether he is familiar with the Legatum Institute—I know that the Minister on the Front Bench is a fan—but the Government seem to give it undue access, and possibly influence, and it has a specific agenda.

Mr Leslie: I do not want to get too side-tracked into my opinions on the advice given by the Legatum Institute. Let alone the Government, I suspect the Legatum Institute has not been doing many impact assessments. The Legatum Institute might be a good cheerleader for the cause—there are many good cheerleaders for that particular cause—but that emotional response is not necessarily evidence-based.

A minute ago, my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) raised the question of what we will get for this divorce bill settlement. That raises the next natural question. Many commentators are assuming that, by moving on to phase 2, we part with this £50 billion or £60 billion and, at last, we are finally able to talk about trade. Actually, under article 50, we will not be entering trade deal territory; we will be entering territory that is about a framework for the future relationship with the European Union.

Lady Hermon: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Leslie: I will give way in a minute.

It is important the Committee realises that phase 2 is not trade talks. The £50 billion does not secure a trade deal. Article 50 refers to:

“an agreement...setting out the arrangements for its withdrawal, taking account of the framework for its future relationship with the Union.”

Phase 2 of these article 50 talks will look at only the framework, not the substance of future relationships. The details of that full trade deal will begin only when the UK becomes a third country, which is important because we are getting to the notion that this is the only financial commitment for which we are on the hook. Phase 2 is actually a bit of an interregnum period. The actual detail of the trade relationship will come after we have left, after exit day. The whole Committee needs to appreciate that.

Anna Soubry: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Bill is paving the way for a hard Brexit? The Bill is dealing with everything up to exit day, and thereafter, if we get a deal, it will be sorted out after we have left the European Union.

Mr Leslie: That is why so many of the amendments tabled by the right hon. Lady and by other hon. Members are crucial to ensuring that Parliament keeps its foot in the door in this process so that we do not just give things away, money for nothing, by giving Ministers total power on exit day to negotiate these arrangements and treat Parliament as a rubber stamp after the fact. We have a duty to make sure we get whatever best deal is possible. Phase 2 could simply be heads of agreement. It could be a couple of sides of A4 simply saying that, after exit, we intend maybe to talk about the details of a particular trade deal. This £50 billion or £60 billion is not purchasing a trade deal.
Ian Murray: Is my hon. Friend arguing that this country will spend up to £67 billion, over which Parliament will have no say, to leave a club and to take us on to a stage to create a framework to re-enter a relationship with that club?

Mr Leslie: More or less, and that that relationship may never match, even partially, the arrangements that we have at present.

If my hon. Friend and other hon. Members will bear with me, we then have to imagine that we have just gone past exit day. We might have a heads of terms framework. We then, of course, enter a two-year transition period, if we are lucky. How much will we have to pay during that transition phase? The notion that our divorce bill is the end of the money is, of course, not right. I anticipate that, during the transition, if we are on the exact same terms as now, which is the impression we have from the Government, we will obviously have to continue paying into the club for those years of transition.

If we want to get any deal at all, especially one that is better than Canada’s comprehensive economic and trade agreement, we will also have to pay into the club for future years. If we are lucky enough to get the inferior arrangement that is the Norway deal, which is certainly better than absolutely nothing but is not as good as the single market and customs union membership we have right now, we will have to pay to be members of the club. The idea that the full benefits of Brexit are to come is a fallacy. The Norwegian people pay £140 per head each year for the Norway arrangement. We pay about £210 to £220 per head per year, so roughly two thirds of that cost will continue, for the inferior relationship. These are costs to our taxpayer that they need to know about, so that they can make assessments of the these things.

6 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend aware yet of the evidence the Chancellor gave to the Treasury Committee this afternoon, when he, in effect, confirmed that there has been no Cabinet decision or agreement about the desired end position of the British Government? So we are leaving the single market and agreement about the desired end position of the British Government confirmed that there has been no Cabinet decision or Treasury Committee this afternoon, when he, in effect, was aware yet of the evidence the Chancellor gave to the Government, we will obviously have to continue paying into the club for those years of transition.

If we want to get any deal at all, especially one that is better than Canada’s comprehensive economic and trade agreement, we will also have to pay into the club for future years. If we are lucky enough to get the inferior arrangement that is the Norway deal, which is certainly better than absolutely nothing but is not as good as the single market and customs union membership we have right now, we will have to pay to be members of the club. The idea that the full benefits of Brexit are to come is a fallacy. The Norwegian people pay £140 per head each year for the Norway arrangement. We pay about £210 to £220 per head per year, so roughly two thirds of that cost will continue, for the inferior relationship. These are costs to our taxpayer that they need to know about, so that they can make assessments of the these things.

Mr Leslie: It is not just an absurdity; it is massively irresponsible for the Government to run headlong in a direction without knowing where they are going and without doing any assessments of potential costs. It is important that the British public see this, because they need to understand that this is not a fait accompli. We do not just have to throw up our hands and say, “Nothing can be done about this. It is all just going to happen.” The British people do have power. They do have a chance to change course. I believe we will see the clock ticking away and there will come a moment when we have to make a judgment and say, “Are we just going to continue to this timeframe?” Article 50 can of course be revoked or put on pause, and we need to consider that as an option. The British people do have the right to think again if, on reflection, they see that this process is too costly and potentially too damaging.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a good case. There is a further cost that he is not taking into account, which is the cost to the public finances. We know that the Red Book takes no account of the £40 billion or £50 billion in the divorce bill, which means that the Government’s forecast—or the OBR’s forecast—for the public finances will be shot to pieces. That means interest rates will go up faster than anticipated and the cost of Government borrowing will go up. This is a major economic event and we need an assessment of that as well from the Government. Does my hon. Friend agree with me?

Mr Leslie: Yes. All hon. Members, not just the Government—there are such hon. Members even on the Labour Benches—will want to commit public resources to all sorts of things, and they need to recognise that if the cost is £60 billion, that is not something to be sniffed at. In a couple of years’ time the deficit is projected to be about £30 billion a year, so we are talking about the equivalent of two years of deficit to be added, presumably, to the national debt at that point in time. That is all notwithstanding what happens to our wider economic circumstances. These things should not just be dismissed.

We should be putting the House of Commons at the centre of this process and not treating it as a peripheral part of the Brexit arrangements. That is why this new clause is so important. Brexit is a costly exercise and Parliament needs to have the chance to properly reflect on it. A potential divorce bill of £1,000 for every man, woman and child in this country certainly should not just be brushed aside. When we ask ourselves what we are getting for this arrangement, we see that we are getting the chance to rip up the finest free trade agreement—a frictionless, tariff-free agreement—of anywhere in the world, for the chance to have something inferior. The current path we are on is not about taking back control; this is about losing control. The idea that Parliament should simply step to one side and agree to have control taken away from it is not acceptable to me and to very many hon. Members. This new clause would at least drag Brexit back into the sunlight and let the public hold those responsible to account.

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): With his customary eloquence, the hon. Member for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie) has given a splendid speech about many things. I wish to divert slightly from his path by taking his new clause seriously as a legislative object, rather than engaging in the interesting questions he raised about the utility or otherwise of the whole of Brexit. The Committee is called upon to decide whether proposed amendments to the legislation are meritorious in terms of achieving the objects of the Bill, and that is what we have done in Committee on many other occasions as we have gone through the Bill.

It is obviously right that Parliament should control public expenditure. The withdrawal agreement will be an element of public expenditure, so one might think that new clause 17 was meritorious. However, it is clear that the payments that the new clause describes will, if they arise at all, be part of an agreement. The Government, rightly, have already said that Parliament will have a vote on the agreement. We cannot vote on an agreement without voting on the financing of an agreement, because the agreement will stipulate the financing. Therefore,
new clause 17 is entirely otiose and there is no reason for the House to vote in favour of it. The House should reserve its voting for a later moment when the Government introduce the amendment to allow us to control the agreement, which I shall certainly support.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I think the Government have gone further. They have said that if there is an agreement, primary legislation would probably be needed to implement it, which means that the full procedures for statutory approval would be required in order for there to be the power to make any payments—as I understand it, there are no legal grounds for making additional payments to the EU, and if the Government wish to do so, they will need legal grounds—and then to cover the full implementation of the agreement.

Sir Oliver Letwin: As so often, my right hon. Friend snatches the next words from my mouth. I was about to say that the House will, as he rightly observes, be called on to vote on primary legislation, as we understand it, which will of course require something called a money resolution, with which I know the hon. Member for Nottingham East is fully familiar because I have heard him make long speeches about them on several occasions. He is an expert at doing so, and no doubt he will enjoy doing so again when the relevant resolution comes before the House, but new clause 17 is not necessary to achieve the objective.

Mr Leslie: The right hon. Gentleman makes a fair point about wanting to probe the details of the new clause, which is specifically about amounts of money paid out without authorisation. He must agree that despite their name, money resolutions do not always specify a sum of money. A draft withdrawal agreement would not necessarily have to set out the amount of money, either. If he has heard otherwise from the Government, I would be interested to know.

Sir Oliver Letwin: I do not think there is the slightest chance that a withdrawal agreement will be put before the House that does not specify, or enable one to calculate, an amount of money: because there is no indication that the EU would accept such a thing. Whether or not we should be paying such an amount is a separate matter. In any event, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald) just said from a sedentary position, if that is a deficiency of a forthcoming money resolution, it is a deficiency shared by new clause 17, which also does not stipulate anything about an amount. One way or the other, I fear that the new clause is otiose. It has given an admirable opportunity for the hon. Gentleman to make an interesting speech, but that is its only virtue. The House should have nothing further to do with it.

Jenny Chapman: It is a real pleasure to be called to contribute. I wish to speak to new clause 80 and amendments 339 and 340 in my name and the names of my right hon. and hon. Friends.

New clause 80 would require a vote in the House on the financial settlement that the Government agree with the European Union. Further, it would require the House to be informed in its decision on that matter by reports from the Office for Budget Responsibility and the National Audit Office. Amendments 339 and 340 would prevent tax or fee-raising powers from being established via tertiary legislation and limit any fees that are levied by public bodies to the cost of the service that the fee is intended to cover.

I should start by referring Members to the third report of the House of Lords Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee from September, which examined the Bill before us today. The report draws our attention to the fact that the delegated powers memorandum notes that those powers would enable the creation of tax-like charges, which go beyond recovering the direct cost of the provision of a service to a specific firm or individual, including to allow for potential cross-subsidisation or to cover the wider functions and running costs of a public body.

The report alerts Parliament to the danger of allowing organisations full-cost recovery of their services without parliamentary scrutiny as it could allow them to gold-plate the services that they offer. As the report says: “A tax-like charge means a tax.” And it “should not be allowed in subordinate legislation. They are matters for Parliament, a principle central to the Bill of Rights 1689. Regulations under clauses 7 and 9 cannot impose or increase taxation. 33 But regulations under Schedule 4 may.”

The report goes on to make the point that that means that Ministers can tax. They can “confer powers on public authorities to tax and they can do so in tertiary legislation that has no parliamentary scrutiny whatsoever.”

New clause 80 also addresses this issue of a lack of parliamentary oversight. As we all know, the Government are in the process of attempting to conclude the first phase of negotiations with the European Union. Part of that process is agreeing a financial settlement, which reflects the obligations that the United Kingdom has incurred as a result of its membership of the European Union. Labour has always been clear that Britain should meet its obligations. We cannot seriously hope to make new agreements on the international stage if we are seen to go back on what we have already agreed. Britain is a far better, fairer and more reliable ally than that.

As the Chancellor said when he attended the Treasury Committee today: “I find it inconceivable that we as a nation would be walking away from an obligation that we recognised as an obligation.”

He continued: “That is just not a credible scenario. That’s not the kind of country we are and frankly it would not make us a credible partner for future international agreements.”

On that, we are agreed. But we have also been clear that the deal must be fair to the taxpayer. Already the Government are attempting to bypass the scrutiny that should take place in this Chamber. This money belongs to the UK taxpayer and they have a right to know how much, and for what they are paying. It is true that the public interest in discovering more about the financial settlements that the Government intend to make with the EU is great, and that there will inevitably and rightly be extensive media coverage. The details, some certain and some speculative, will be pored over by commentators. Estimates will be made and objections proffered on the basis—sometimes, I venture to say—of inaccurate or incomplete information. That is not a satisfactory way to proceed. The House must get a grip of this process and demand the ability to scrutinise and take a view on the deals reached.
Our new clause argues that this House should have a vote, and also that the vote should be properly informed. Being properly informed means that independent analysis by the OBR and the NAO must be provided to assist this House in its consideration of the deal. We are going to need that, because the financial settlement will not be straightforward, and unvarnished truths will be hard to come by. Crudely speaking, the Government will try to make the amount look as reasonable as possible and the EU will try to show that it has everything that it thinks it is due.

The Government will want to highlight estimates that show how payments will be less than half the £100 billion liability, once UK projects have been taken into account. As Alex Barker in the Financial Times put it last week: “Ministers are banking on Treasury budget wizards making the exit price look as small as possible.”

The two sides in the negotiation could look at the same agreement and come up with net estimates that are quite different.

Helen Goodman: I am just puzzling over how the Government think this will work. Has my hon. Friend thought about this: it is highly likely that we will make a number of payments over a period of time, which means that the payment could be spread into another Parliament? Given that no Parliament can bind its successor, how does she think that the Government can make this agreement?

Jenny Chapman: That is a very interesting point. As a fellow member of the Select Committee on Procedure for several years, I am not surprised that my hon. Friend has spotted this. I would be fascinated to hear what the Minister has to say about that when he gets to his feet later this evening.

Parliament ought to have the ability to debate, scrutinise and reach its own conclusion on this matter. If we do not, we will be the only people not tussling with it. This Parliament wants to do as the people said we should: take back control. The Chief Secretary to the Treasury said in response to an urgent question from my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie) that give Parliament details about the settlement “would not be in our national interest”—[Official Report, 29 November 2017; Vol. 632, c. 327.]

That is not good enough. She said that she will “update the House” when there is more to say, but we do not want to be updated; we want the ability to decide.

6.15 pm

We understand that the Government cannot, at this stage, set out a precise figure, given that we are at a sensitive stage of the negotiations. But the financial settlement needs to be assessed by the OBR and the NAO, and MPs need to have a vote. Lord Heseltine made the point well when he asked, “what would a Conservative opposition do if a Labour party proposed to spend £30bn, £40bn or £50bn without telling Parliament what it was doing with it?”

The hon. Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond) went further and said of the bill, “It is very difficult for the Government to continue to say post-council that we cannot...set out how it is calculated”.

He also said that he hopes that the Government “keep its promise to be as transparent as possible”. Well, I hope so too.

Labour believes that any agreement on money with the EU must meet our international obligations while delivering a fair deal for British taxpayers. But unless the Government are transparent at every stage of this process and Parliament is given sufficient opportunity to scrutinise the final figure, how will we know? The Government are crumbling before our eyes. The Foreign Secretary says the EU can “go whistle”, while the Prime Minister does not want to share any details on money or anything else, even with those who are supposed to be her political partners.

This evening, the Committee has the opportunity to vote for transparency and accountability—to give “taking back control” its true meaning. This Parliament needs to step up and do its job.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I was slightly not expecting to be called to speak then. I am very glad that I have been—honestly. It is good to have the opportunity to speak in this debate, particularly on the financial aspects of the Bill. Given the rumours that we heard last week in the press about the divorce bill, which have not yet been substantiated by the UK Government, this is a good time to be having this discussion.

As a number of hon. Members have said, it is clear that the divorce bill is likely to be significant. But the reason that we are making assumptions—or trying to come up with ideas about what the divorce bill might look like—is because there are no solid facts coming out of the Government. It would be incredibly useful for all of us if the Government were to say, “This is how we expect the divorce bill to be structured. This is what we expect the money to be spent on. This is how we expect it to be allocated.” We would then be able to provide appropriate scrutiny, which is the job not just of the Opposition, but of Back-Bench Government Members. It would be useful if we were able to do that.

The Government say that they have not pinned down exactly how much money we are talking about, but they have not even said that they will tell us the breakdown of the money in the end. They have not promised that level of certainty. It is all well and good for Conservative Members to say, “I’m sure that the Government will give us this information.” It would be a positive step forward if the Government actually committed to doing that.

We cannot have the devolved Administrations having to pay money towards the divorce bill. It is ridiculous that this Parliament would in any circumstances suggest that the devolved Administrations should have to pay towards something that Scotland and Northern Ireland did not vote for as those countries. It would be incredibly galling if it were suggested that we had to use the money that we would spend on public services, over which the devolved authorities have discretion, to pay any portion of the divorce bill. We would completely disagree with that.

My best guess, given the lack of information from the Government, is that the divorce bill that is being spoken about is not for future trade access, or to allow us to get into the single market or to use the customs union. In fact, the Government have been clear that they do not want us to be in the single market or the customs union. This £50 billion or £50 billion or up to £100 billion—who knows how much it will actually be—is just for our ongoing liabilities. It is not to give us access. As I have
said, if the Government said what it was actually for, we would throw less accusations across the House at them about it.

New clause 80 on the transparency of the financial settlement pretty well covers what we are seeking from the Government. We need to see all that detail and it would be good to see it as soon as possible.

We have seen how the Government have behaved. The Prime Minister’s speeches have not been made to this House and she has had to come to the House afterwards to make statements. I think that, when the divorce bill is agreed—when there is a signature on the dotted line—the UK Government should have to come to tell the House first. If we are talking about bringing about sovereignty, that is the way in which such things should be undertaken. There should not just be an announcement or a speech; there should be a proper announcement to this House so that the divorce bill can be effectively scrutinised. That would be the best way to do business.

I will move on to parliamentary scrutiny and the issue of sovereignty. The hon. Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman) spoke about fees and levies being put into statutory instruments. She was absolutely correct that, if something is a tax-like charge, it is a tax. Therefore, it should not go through a Delegated Legislation Committee; it should be in primary legislation that is discussed on the Floor of the House.

The statutory instrument system we have is already pretty rubbish. We are given the SI without much notice. When we go into the Committee, we do not know how things will go. It tends to be made up of a number of MPs who are pretty disinterested, most of whom have not read the legislation. I have been on two SI Committees over the past couple of weeks. One took about five minutes and the other took much longer and involved a much more in-depth discussion. Before we go into an SI Committee, we do not know which one of those it is likely to be, because no measure of priority or importance is given to them in advance. If we are going to put everything, from taxes to the replacement of EU workers legislation, through an SI Committee, we need a better SI system in this House to ensure that there is proper scrutiny.

To have another slight rant about proper scrutiny, the estimates process in this House is utter nonsense and does not provide proper scrutiny. I have been shouting about that for a very long time and I will not stop. If the UK Government decide that the £50 billion will go through the estimates process and will not, therefore, be properly scrutinised, there will be an awful lot of incredibly upset Members in this House, and not just on the Opposition Benches. I would like the Government, if possible, to be very clear that if there is to be a vote on this money in Parliament, there will be a proper vote—not a vote as part of the estimates process, during which we are not allowed to discuss things in great detail.

Martin Whitfield: As well as upset Members in this House, does the hon. Lady not envisage thousands of upset people outside this place—namely, our constituents?

Kirsty Blackman: I absolutely agree. If the incredibly inadequate estimates procedure were used, an awful lot of my constituents would say to me, “Why did you not talk about this?”; and I would have to say, “Because it didn’t happen to be picked by the Liaison Committee and therefore we had to talk about something else and couldn’t vote on specific amendments or matters.” That would be a major concern to people here and people outside. It would be great if the Government could give the commitment today that any vote on the divorce bill will not happen through the estimates procedure and will be properly scrutinised on the Floor of the House.

It is really important that we do get House of Commons approval for any financial settlement that is agreed on. It absolutely has to be agreed by this House. I would prefer it also to be agreed by the House of Lords. It would be sensible for it to have as much scrutiny as possible before any agreement happens. We are making it very clear that that is very important to us.

Last week, I called for the Chancellor to bring forward an emergency Budget. The Budget that we had the week before last made no mention of payments in relation to a withdrawal settlement, but the Chancellor must have had some idea about this. I can only assume that he did, but given that the DUP did not know what was going on with the agreement that had been made on Monday, perhaps he did not. He should have had some idea of the ballpark figure that was going to come out in the news the following week, and therefore it should have been in the Budget. As it was not in this year’s Budget, the Chancellor needs to come to the House and introduce an emergency Budget explaining how he is going to pay for this bill—which taxes he is going to raise, perhaps—and where the money is going to come from, and then this House should properly debate the matter.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I agree with the hon. Lady to a large extent. We do not want hidden protocols whereby certain secret agreements about expenditure do not come before the House. We want full exposure and a comprehensive view of this.

Kirsty Blackman: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman, with whom I used to serve on the Scottish Affairs Committee. This does need to be as transparent as possible. Every bit of money that is agreed between the UK Government and the EU as part of the withdrawal settlement needs to be itemised. We need to know what the UK is agreeing to pay for and the timescale over which we will be paying it.

Wes Streeting: I entirely agree with the points that the hon. Lady is making. It was interesting that this afternoon in the Treasury Committee, the Chancellor acknowledged that the cost to the UK of settling any outstanding debts with the European Union will be small beer compared with the costs if we do not get a good long-term trading relationship with the EU. There are two issues: the short-term cost and the impact on the scorecard, and the long-term cost to the economy and the damage that that will do if we cannot move on to phase 2 of these talks.

Kirsty Blackman: I absolutely agree. I will come on to the more indirect costs in a moment, but first I want to mention one more thing in relation to direct costs.

There is still ongoing uncertainty about the replacements, or possible replacements, for EU structural funds—for example, the Horizon 2020 money, the social fund and the common agricultural policy payments. We have a
level of certainty on some of those in the very short term, but what happens after April 2019? What happens to the projects that currently receive money, or are likely to be bidding for money in future? What are the UK Government going to do to replace those funds? We do not have any certainty on the replacements for most of the direct funding.

I now move on to the indirect costs of Brexit. I am totally baffled as to whether or not there are economic impact assessments. The UK Government told us that there were impact assessments. They were incredibly clear that there were impact assessments and so they definitely knew how this was going to impact on the economy. Then, at the Brexit Committee, the Secretary of State said that there are no economic impact assessments. Any kind of responsible organisation does an economic impact assessment—before it takes an action, preferably. If an organisation is in this crazy situation where it has signed up to an action and drawn all these ridiculous red lines, it will probably be wise to do the economic impact assessments then so that it has an idea of quite how much of a mess it has got itself into.

Tom Brake: I do not know whether the hon. Lady is one of a number of MPs, including me, who put in a freedom of information request to access these reports. The response we got was that they could not be released because the information contained therein would damage the UK’s negotiating position. I do not know whether she has been to see the reports, but frankly there is nothing in them that could not be obtained by googling different sectors. I am not quite sure why that was used as an excuse for not releasing them to Members of Parliament.

6.30 pm

Kirsty Blackman: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments. I have heard that pretty insubstantial information has been provided, particularly on the numbers.

I was concerned to note that the UK Government have made a call for evidence on trade remedies. They want information from companies, organisations and sectors about which trade remedies are important to their sector. The UK Government do not know which remedies are important, because they have not done the work. They do not have a good enough understanding of the sectoral impact of Brexit.

I shall highlight a few things in relation to that. The Bank of England recently asked what would happen to cross-border derivative contracts and insurance policies after Brexit. The UK Government have not answered the question. I asked them what would happen to rules of origin and what would happen to companies that, for example, made cars in the UK. What would happen to free trade arrangements that call for cars to have 55% or 60% UK content? Currently, it is EU content, but in the event of Brexit we would seek 55% or 60% UK content. Our cars do not have that much UK content, so I asked the UK Government for their position on rules of origin and what they were doing about that. Basically, the answer was “We don’t really know.”

There has been a complete lack of understanding. An awful lot of companies and organisations are going to the Government and saying, “This is our problem. You need to fix it—and you can do it this way.” Most of them have come up with solutions and have suggested ways to fix things. Insurance organisations, for example, have a huge problem. If they sell insurance to someone in an EU country, after exit date they will no longer be able to collect premiums or not pay out in the event then someone makes a claim, and they will not be allowed to write to those people to tell them that they cannot do those things, because that is how the rules work.

The UK Government could attempt to give certainty now on a number of such issues, including customs. The economic impacts of this are unbelievable, and the regulatory impacts are baffling even the Government. The impacts are going to be too big for anyone to comprehend. Most of the stuff that we will look at in future, according to how the Bill is drawn up, will be dealt with in SI Committees. It is totally inadequate to discuss incredibly important regulatory regimes, levies and taxes in such Committees. That is not how the Government should proceed. They should change their mind on that and look at the amendments that have been tabled, particularly by the hon. Member for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie). The SNP is willing to endorse them, and we thank him for introducing them.

I wish to speak briefly to my amendments 152 and 153 to schedule 4, which touch on the matter raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman). She pointed out that while it was a good thing that Ministers could assure us that no new taxes would be introduced as a result of the sweeping powers that the Bill gives to Ministers—I am glad that new taxes are not going to be imposed on us through the use of these powers—nevertheless the Bill gives them the powers to impose charges. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to make the point, which was also made by the hon. Member for Aberdeen North, that there is frankly precious little difference between taxes and charges.

There are wide powers in the Bill to impose new charges, so my amendments 152 and 153 are intended to constrain the power of Ministers to impose charges, which could be almost limitless in scope. I hope that the Minister, in winding up the debate, will be able to give assurances to the Committee that these powers will not be used in ways that none of us would want. I hope that by probing the Minister’s intentions through my amendments I will receive the assurances I seek.

Amendment 152 would amend line 35 of schedule 4, on page 32. The schedule is slightly alarmingly worded, and the amendment is to part 1, which deals with the power to provide for fees or charges. Paragraph 1(3) lists various things that Ministers can introduce regulations to do: to prescribe fees or charges; to provide for recovery of any sums payable; and to confer power on public authorities to do rather similar things. The subparagraph explicitly allows Ministers to introduce regulations on those three things, but its first line also reads:

“Regulations under this paragraph may (among other things)”. 
Apart from the three specific things, which, frankly, sound rather alarming, it seems that there are some other, non-specified things that the schedule would empower Ministers to do. Amendment 152 simply proposes the deletion of the words “among other things”, so that at least Ministers can do only three things to demand money from taxpayers or charge payers.

Stephen Timms: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The amendment simply constrains Ministers’ ability to introduce new charges—she calls them taxes, and she has every right to do so—under the secondary legislation envisaged in schedule 4. What I hope the Minister will do is assure us that by “among other things” he is not envisaging some great long list of new money-raising powers.

Helen Goodman: Before my right hon. Friend moves on, is it not worth considering those EU agencies, such as the European Medicines Agency, that are financed by charges on the industry, not by the taxpayer? We should really be hearing from the Minister how the Government propose to fund such agencies in future.

Stephen Timms: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We come directly to that point in amendment 153, in which we propose to add to schedule 4 the words set out on the amendment paper, which I shall read out. We propose to constrain Ministers’ powers by saying, first, that regulations “may not be made for the purposes of...creating a fee or charge that does not replicate a fee or charge levied by an EU entity on exit day”.

That is exactly the point my hon. Friend has just raised. We of course recognise that a lot of charges are imposed at the moment by EU bodies of one sort or another—she mentioned a very important one—and that, in future, comparable fees or charges may well need to be levied by UK entities, but the aim of the first paragraph of amendment 153 is to make it clear that Ministers cannot impose new fees or charges for which there is not already a counterpart from the EU entity.

Sir Oliver Letwin: The right hon. Gentleman is doing exactly what needs to be done in Committee, and I have considerable sympathy with his ambitions. Has he considered whether the reference to remedying deficiencies as the basis for secondary legislation powers under the Bill would in any case have the effect he is describing?

Stephen Timms: I had not considered that, and the right hon. Gentleman may well have a point. I would be interested to know whether that is indeed the case. That interesting point is certainly worth pursuing, and I would welcome it if he expanded on that later.

Secondly, amendment 153 states that Ministers cannot bring forward regulations for the purpose of “increasing a fee or charge to an amount larger than an amount charged by an EU entity for the performance of the relevant function on exit day.”

Let me take the example my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) mentioned. The European Medicines Agency does very important work, and it charges the industry for that work. I am suggesting that the secondary legislation powers in schedule 4 should not be used to introduce a charge for the same function that is higher than the one currently charged by the European Medicines Agency. There may well be a loss of economies of scale in leaving the European Medicines Agency, and it may well be that undertaking that function purely for the UK will be a less efficient process than doing it EU-wide, as the European Medicines Agency does, but I do not think the secondary legislation powers in the schedule should be used to impose on industry or any charge payer a fee that is higher than the one currently charged by the EU entity.

I accept that there may well in due course need to be some higher fees or charges than those currently levied by EU entities, because the process may well be less efficient when carried out at a UK-only level, but I do not think the secondary legislation powers should be used for that purpose. If Ministers want to bring forward a proposal to impose a higher fee or charge, they should do so through the proper parliamentary process, with scrutiny by this House, not through secondary legislation powers.

Helen Goodman: One of the points made to me by those in the industry is that if these fees and charges shoot up, that will have an impact on their competitiveness, which is the last thing we want. Does that not reinforce my right hon. Friend’s point?

Stephen Timms: Once again, my hon. Friend is absolutely right. Indeed, my amendments arise specifically from the discussions I have had with those in the tech sector who are worried about the prospect of being hit by substantially larger fees and charges in the future, which is exactly what the powers in the schedule would allow Ministers to do.

I very much hope that the Minister will give us an assurance that these powers will not be used in that way, and that we will not find that industry and charge payers of other kinds are hit by fees or charges that are not being charged at the moment or are higher than those currently being charged. I very much look forward to the Minister’s response.

6.45 pm

Tom Brake: Although new clause 17 may be otiose, to echo the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin), it does at least give Members the opportunity to express strong views on aspects of Brexit. I wonder whether among Government Members there is any sense of humility, shame or embarrassment about what they are inflicting on the country. Looking at the chaos and instability, and indeed the loss of influence, the UK has experienced in the past few months, I would have thought that some Conservative Members would be starting to question their enthusiastic endorsement of action that is weakening the United Kingdom and leaving us much, much poorer.
I know there are Members on both sides of this House who were remain supporters and who are keeping quiet and biding their time. They tell me that they are waiting for the polls to shift before coming out and voicing their concerns about the impact of Brexit more openly. I point out to them that they do not have much time to wait for the polls to shift before Brexit goes ahead—if it goes ahead. I say “if” because there is nothing final about it. Clearly article 50 is revocable, and although the will of the people on 23 June last year expressed itself one way, current polling suggests a majority in favour of a vote on the deal.

Mr Leslie: The right hon. Gentleman’s remarks so far are interesting. Is it not telling that those who urged the country to take this course—those who feel that Brexit will provide this dividend, these great riches—are amazingly mute today? When it comes to the crunch, they do not want to be seen to defend Brexit and the impact it will have on the public finances. I think they should be made to vote for the consequences of the actions they argued for.

Tom Brake: I agree absolutely. That is why new clause 17, which the hon. Gentleman moved, is not otiose at all. It would put people on the spot: they would have to vote, hopefully for a figure. I hope the Government will want to do that, in the name of accountability and transparency. We need a figure, because there is a real risk. We have seen press reports that some arrangement will be reached whereby the Government and the leading leave campaigners within the Government will be saved the embarrassment of a very large—£45 billion to £50 billion—figure being put into the public domain. As several Members have said this afternoon, that is the down payment, not the final divorce settlement.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): Speaking as one who voted to remain, I was disappointed on that Friday morning, but I accept the will of the people. Is the right hon. Gentleman suggesting that we ignore that?

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Does my right hon. Friend not agree that we should call this process a vote on the deal? This vote would be different in nature, given the facts now available to us—given that the initial settlement will be £45 billion or £50 billion; that huge problems have been created at the border between Ireland and Northern Ireland; and that 16 or 17 months on, the issue of EU citizens here is still not resolved.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman has sparked a highly relevant debate. The referendum asked whether we should leave or not. What we are debating in the Bill is how we leave. We have learned that the process is a series of decisions; there is not one way to leave the EU. We need to keep every option open, not shut doors as this Government are doing, so that if the public mood shifts, as it might well do, all options are open.

Tom Brake: I agree. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will regret, as many Opposition Members and I do, that very early on, the Government shut down some of the options available to us regarding the single market and the customs union. There was no attempt by the Government to negotiate with the European Union on whether there was scope for the EU to give ground, including on freedom of movement. I know from contacts that I have had that there would have been some appetite among some EU countries to give ground on freedom of movement, but that is not something that the Government sought.

Stephen Kerr: We have had a huge election within the past six months. The Conservative party went into that election with a manifesto commitment to honouring the outcome of the June 2016 referendum. I am not sure that I quite understand what the right hon. Gentleman does not understand about what the result of that election meant for the representation of the parties in this House. The majority of Members in this House are elected on a platform of leaving the European Union.

Tom Brake: The clearest outcome of the general election was that the hon. Gentleman’s party lost its majority and is now in an unwieldy and dangerous relationship with the Democratic Unionist party. The route that the Government are going down—a particularly hard Brexit—was not endorsed in the general election.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): We have discussed the Irish border an awful lot this week. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that one obvious solution to the Irish border situation is for the whole UK to remain in the single market and customs union?

Tom Brake: Absolutely; that is probably the only safe solution to the question of Ireland and Northern Ireland—and it is one that, unfortunately, our Government ruled out at the outset. They probably rue the consequences of that decision.

I have strayed slightly from new clause 17, but I certainly do not think that the new clause is otiose. When the right hon. Member for West Dorset called it that, it reminded me of his term in the Cabinet Office. I am absolutely convinced that as a senior Minister with an overview of the activities of all Government Departments, he would never have accepted the Government’s going forward with an economic project on the scale of Brexit without insisting that each
[Tom Brake]

Department conducted a decent impact assessment for all sectors for which it was responsible. If he disagrees and wants to say that when he was at the Cabinet Office, he would have been perfectly happy with the Government forging ahead in this way with the single biggest economic—and, I would say, most damaging—project that the country has undertaken in 50 years, I give him the opportunity to do so now. Members will note that he has not taken it. I think that must be taken as an indication that he not happy with Conservative Front Benchers, who have decided to proceed without conducting any impact assessments of Brexit.

When Opposition Members heard from Ministers about impact assessments and sectoral analysis, we rightly expected the Government to have conducted an impact assessment of hard Brexit, of perhaps the Norway model and the ‘Turkey model, of no deal and of our current arrangements to inform the House properly about the impact of Brexit. We would then have known about not just the down payment of £45 billion, or whatever it will be, but the long-term financial consequences for the automotive, pharmaceutical and agricultural sectors and all the other sectors that will be so greatly affected.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The right hon. Gentleman is making an incredibly powerful case about the importance of data. Just today, John Curtice has released information that proves that a majority of the British public now believe that Brexit will be bad for our economy, so even the British people have twigged that something is awry. Does the right hon. Gentleman think that the lack of impact assessments will compound that sensation?

Tom Brake: The British public cannot but note the incompetence that our Government have shown. Whether they were leave or remain supporters, when they see a Government in chaos, conducting negotiations in a cack-handed manner, it is not surprising that they are beginning to worry about the impact of Brexit.

Bill Grant: The right hon. Gentleman mentions impact assessments. I wonder whether our 27 friends in the EU model and the ‘Turkey model, of no deal and of our current arrangements to inform the House properly about the impact of Brexit. We would then have known about not just the down payment of £45 billion, or whatever it will be, but the long-term financial consequences for the automotive, pharmaceutical and agricultural sectors and all the other sectors that will be so greatly affected.

Hon. Members may be pleased to hear that I am about to conclude—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hooray!” Thank you. Apparently, Brexit is about taking back control. We therefore need to ensure that new clause 17 is put into statute so that Parliament has the opportunity to take back control and demonstrate whether we think that the down payment of £45 billion, £50 billion or £55 billion is a price worth paying for the views of a relatively small number of Brexit-obsessed Conservative Members of Parliament.

Martin Whitfield: I want to speak in support of the new clause. I have listened to several hon. Members compare the purchase of houses and cars with Brexit. I have also heard Members point to the necessity of knowing exactly what we are buying. With such a large transaction looming, a simple figure is the least one should expect. Beyond that, however, I think it perfectly reasonable to ask how the figure was calculated. When I receive my bill in a restaurant, I expect to be able to see how much each item cost. I look at the bill, and then—hopefully—I pay. Alternatively, I dispute the bill, and say, “I was not taken with the main course.” Similarly, if I am looking at cars, I may say, “This car is not worth that.” If a survey has shown that there are serious problems with a house, I say, “I am not prepared to pay that: I expect you, the owner, to put it right first.”

7 pm

New clause 17 asks no more than that. It says, “Let us see the figure. Let us see the calculation. Let us be able to offer an opinion. Let us be able to offer what our constituents send us here for: a vote on whether or not we are prepared to go back to them and say, “This is the bill.” When we are presented with a bill for an unlimited amount that has been guessed to be £40 billion, or £60 billion, or however many billions of pounds sterling, or maybe euros, is it too much to ask—indeed, is it too much to expect—to be given a set figure and an explanation of what the money is for, and is this not the place in which to have a discussion about it? There could be a debate on a statutory instrument in a Committee watched by a few and ignored by many, and—as we heard earlier from the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman)—perhaps ignored by some of the MPs who have been asked to attend it, but the place in which to discuss the issue is here, so that our constituents can see what we are saying about it and how we are defending or, indeed, opposing it.

Conservative Members have spoken of the need to respect the result of the referendum, and it has been pointed out that that was included in the manifestos of a number of the major parties. There is nothing wrong with accepting the result, because when we asked the public whether they wanted to stay or leave, we were unable to give them any figures, apart from, possibly, one painted on the side of a bus. We asked them whether their intention was to leave Europe, and they answered yes to that question. The new clause proposes that we explain to our constituents—and, I must add, to Members themselves—what the actual cost will be: not “may be”, not “can be”, not even “should be”, but “will be”. We have a responsibility to do that. The new clause simply requests that “a draft of the instrument authorising that payment” should be “laid before, and approved by a resolution of the House of Commons.”
A huge amount of the Bill draws into the Executive a sovereignty which, in my opinion, extends far beyond that which the Executive should rightfully exercise. The new clause would put parliamentary sovereignty back where it belongs, where Members of this House can vote on it. We have heard quotations about how the referendum allowed people to “take back their money” and to get a “Brexit bonus”. Much has been made of the potential, but the reality of how we leave Europe and the reality of the consequences are now starting to become apparent.

Mr Leslie: My hon. Friend is making a powerful case for parliamentary sovereignty, clarity and transparency. Do his constituents, like mine, not expect that when they elect a Member of Parliament, that Member of Parliament’s job is to exercise sound stewardship of the money that they part with—the money that they give to the Chancellor and the Treasury when they pay their taxes? Would they not be mystified, and very angry, if they thought that we were nodding through £40 billion or £60 billion without specific authority? Would they not be absolutely astonished at the Government’s implied proposition?

Martin Whitfield: That clearly must be the case. There is an expectation on us to explain how the pounds, shillings and pence are spent, rather than just say, “Oh, it was just nodded through,” and when asked how much it cost, say “I have no idea.” That is unacceptable to those who send us here, and rightly so, because it is their taxes that pay for this; it is their work, their productivity and their hard graft—to use a phrase I heard earlier today—that raises the money to meet these bills.

The draft of the instrument in new clause 17 and of the regulations in new clause 80 are put there on the expectation that there is some transparency. The events of the last few days, weeks, and certainly months would have seriously benefited from having had far more transparency about what is happening. It is not necessarily the case that keeping hidden a sector title of “Forestry” aids our negotiations. If there were more transparency, the Government would have had far more useful and sensible advice from various industries around the UK. If they consider, even or stumble upon the idea of, an impact assessment for the regions, and perhaps if they share with the regions that that is being carried out, the regions—and indeed the devolved powers—could share with the regions that that is being carried out, the impact assessment for the regions, and perhaps if they shared some of their expertise, so that, as with these amendments, when measures come back to this House we may make a reasoned decision based on facts, influenced by our constituents’ views and genuinely aiming to make the best of a situation that, much like the vaunted driverless cars, could be heading for an absolute disaster.

Ian Paisley: When the hon. Member for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie) moved new clause 17 he made a number of worthy points that need to be addressed. I will obviously be voting against the new clause if it is pressed to a vote, and I hope that that is the point, but in terms of the raison d’être of all of these amendments, the cat has been let out of the bag: the hon. Gentleman wishes to revoke article 50 and thereby overturn the will of 17.4 million people. That is the be-all and end-all—that is the raison d’être of what we have heard tonight. The whole tactic of these amendments—no matter how reasonable they might sound and how powerfully supported by some Members—is essentially to do-over the will of the British people.

Mr Leslie: The hon. Gentleman is being a little unfair. He should look at the text of the amendment, which simply says that the consequences of Brexit—the costs to the public and his constituents, who might have to fork out £1,000 per man, woman and child—should be authorised by this Parliament; we should take back control. The hon. Gentleman can imply all sorts of motives on my shoulders for tabling it, but it would be honourable if we could address the topic at hand.

Ian Paisley: I am addressing the topic. Does the hon. Gentleman deny that he wishes to revoke article 50 and turn over the will of the British people?

Mr Leslie: The point that I made was that article 50 can be revoked if the British public wish that to be the case. The Prime Minister has not denied that is the case; she might say that it is Government policy not to revoke article 50, but she has not said that it is impossible to do so. I was simply pointing out a legal reality.

Ian Paisley: The hon. Gentleman says he has pointed out a legal reality, but the Labour party’s position on all of these matters is now no clearer than mud. Are we ultimately going to honour the will of the British people, enact this Bill, and withdraw from the EU? That is the bottom line. All these amendments are slowly but surely being exposed as having a different motivation. It was said earlier that there was a need to put the Brexit Members of Parliament on the spot and get them to vote for the consequences of Brexit. I will happily walk through the Division Lobby tonight to vote down new clause 17, for the very reason that I wish to put into practice and into law the will of the British people. They voted to leave, and we must bring it on and allow them to leave. Confusion has been allowed to reign as a result of the proposed amendments.

Mr Kenneth Clarke: I have never heard anybody put this argument in quite this extreme way. The British public answered the simple question of whether they wished to leave the European Union, but that question carried within it hundreds of highly complicated sub-questions which now have to be addressed after the negotiations. Is the hon. Gentleman saying that we should not, for example, discuss the basis on which we make a contribution towards accrued pension liabilities during our membership of the European Union because our masters, the people, have decided that we must pay those accrued pension liabilities and are indifferent to how much that will cost? That is an absurd misuse of the one simple question about whether or not to stay in the EU.

Ian Paisley: The right hon. and learned Gentleman, the Father of the House, has been a Member of Parliament for many years, and he will know that it is only very occasionally that the British people are asked their view by way of a referendum. Indeed, that has probably happened on only two occasions in his lifetime. On both of those occasions, the will of the British people was enacted by this place. Yes, of course there is debate. Who says that there should not be reasoned debate?
[Ian Paisley]

[HON. MEMBERS: "You."] I do not say that, and I have not said that. Don't be silly. [Interjection] I am not saying it now. I am saying what the raison d'être behind the debate is, which is very different. Let us have the debate. I have actually used the words “bring it on”. If the Father of the House is suggesting that this occasion is just the same as every other occasion, I have to tell him, with due respect, that he is wrong. The will of the people has been expressed through a referendum. That is what makes this different.

Wera Hobhouse: Is not this debate bringing out the fact that the will of the people is a very mixed bag? Is it not therefore admissible for us to get close to the will of the people through these debates and, if it appears that we are going to get a great result out of Brexit, to go to the people again and ask them to confirm or reject their original decision? That is what I call democracy.

Ian Paisley: The hon. Lady has made the point about having a second referendum on a number of occasions, and I believe that the proposal has been rejected. She is of course entitled to keep making that call, but I believe that it will continue to fall on deaf ears. However, she is right to continue to fight her corner.

Tom Brake: The hon. Gentleman says that the proposal has been rejected. He might have heard me refer earlier to a Survation poll at the weekend which confirmed that 50% of people now support the idea of a vote on the deal, and that only a third of them oppose it.

Ian Paisley: Yes, and every single poll that I have read about myself and my party tells me that I have lost every election, but in reality I have won them all. The poll that ultimately counts is the one that is taken by the people.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the logic of the Lib Dems' position—which they certainly did not put forward on Second Reading of the Bill that introduced the provisions for the referendum—is that we should have three referendums? In that way, it could be the best of three, or they could carry on until they got the result they wanted.

Ian Paisley: My hon. Friend puts his finger on a very Irish solution to the problem. I remember the Lisbon treaty. The Irish voted against it, but they were told by their political masters that they had made the wrong decision and had to vote again. This is ultimately a ruse to ignore the will of the British people, as expressed in a referendum on this matter.

Tom Brake: I just want to get the hon. Gentleman on the record saying that, whatever happens to public opinion and however bad the negotiations go, even if the 50% who believe that there should be a vote on the deal grows to 90%, he is adamant that, because of the vote on 23 June 2016, nothing can ever change.

7.15 pm

Ian Paisley: In the same way that public opinion changed from 1973 to the present—

The Temporary Chair (David Hanson): Order. I remind Members that we are supposed to be debating the financial provisions. We are straying into the terms of any second referendum.

Ian Paisley: I will take your instruction, Mr Hanson, but I think that the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) knows where I stand on that point.

I was hoping to hear some clarity from Labour’s Front Bench tonight, instead of more confusion. I was hoping to hear some key arguments about why the Opposition are putting forward some of these amendments to deal with the consequences of the divorce bill. I wanted to hear them deal with who should pay, with freedom of movement and with the single market. I wanted a hard and fast line, but I am afraid that we heard even more confusion.

We have had a diet of this confusion for some time. The right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) said that we must leave the single market and respect the referendum result. The hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) said that we should stay in the single market and the customs union permanently. The hon. Members for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) and for Dartington (Jenny Chapman) said on another occasion that we have to leave the single market. The right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) said that we should keep freedom of movement. The right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), the Leader of the Opposition, and the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), the shadow Brexit Secretary, have said that freedom of movement ends with Brexit.

We really need more clarity from the Labour party. If it is going to try to persuade us on these key issues, it needs a single position. At least the Government, for all the problems that have been pointed out, have a single position. I think that would be a good starting point.

Helen Goodman: I am pleased to have the opportunity to support new clause 17, moved with great elan by my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie), new clause 8, tabled by the Labour Front Benchers, and amendments 152 and 153, tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms).

It seems completely reasonable for the House to expect the Government to produce papers explaining the basis of the payments that we will have to make in order to secure a successful Brexit. We want to know from the Government in writing what legal obligations they accept, what they agree to in relation to our obligations under the current five-year EU budget, what they believe our long-term liabilities are—such things as pensions—and how our share of the EU’s assets are being taken into account in the calculation. For example, it would be extremely helpful to know the Government’s position on the European Investment Bank, because we still do not have clarity on that. That will obviously play some part in the divorce Bill. We need to know what the number is, but we also need to know whether it has been worked out in a reasonable way, because the moment it is not at all clear how the assessment has been made. We are asking for a parliamentary opportunity to look at this.
We also want to know Ministers’ plan for how the payment will be made. What will be paid earlier and what will be paid over time? What account will Ministers take of fluctuations in the exchange rate? The pound has fallen by 12% since the referendum in the summer of 2016. That is not a huge amount, but it has a significant impact on these numbers. If the Government agree a figure of £50 billion, it would increase the bill by €6 billion or £5 billion. How will the Government manage such exchange rate risks?

Tom Brake: Does the hon. Lady agree that a good way for the Government to publicise precisely how much the bill will be is for them to put the figure on the side of a red bus and for senior members of the Government to drive around the country publicising the £45 billion down payment?

Helen Goodman: That is a good, eminently sensible idea. I will return to the public’s attitude when I wind up my remarks.

This is a significant sum. When we bailed out the banks 10 years ago, we spent £133 billion. Now we are talking about a figure of £50 billion, which will have a significant impact on the public finances. I am sympathetic to the remarks of the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) on the inadequacies of the current estimates procedure. Given that this is an exceptionally large sum of money on an exceptionally important item, and given that this is exceptionally politically sensitive, we expect a much better way for Parliament to approve the sums of money. That is what new clauses 17 and 80 are driving at.

I am worried about the impact on the public finances. Not only is this a big number, but it seems to be a big number that the Chancellor did not take into account when putting together the Red Book, in which he included the current net payments to the EU of £9 billion a year up to 2019 and, thereafter, £12 billion a year of continued expenditure on items coming back to this country that are currently the responsibility of shared EU programmes, such as agricultural support, universities and R and D. He put in £3 billion for transitional costs, such as new computer systems at HMRC and the Rural Payments Agency, but he did not put anything in for the divorce bill. His forecast of the deficit coming down and of debt starting to fall towards the end of this Parliament is bound to be wrong unless the Government present the British people with a whopping great tax bill.

Peter Kyle: Does my hon. Friend agree that, considering our current trajectory under this Government, the other big black hole in the Red Book is how much we will have to pay for access to the single market after we leave?

Helen Goodman: My hon. Friend is right, but I am confining myself to the impact of new clauses 17 and 80.

We need to understand how Ministers will cope with this big bill when the deal is done. Will Ministers give everybody a massive tax bill—and it will be a massive tax bill, because we are talking about at least £800 per person, or £3,000 per household—or will they increase Government borrowing?

I return to the simple point about the promises that were made by, among others, the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), during the referendum campaign—the £350 million a week for the NHS that we saw on the side of a bus. This is £16 billion a year. After the Brexit vote, I had a number of public meetings with my constituents and asked them what their expectation was when they voted to leave the EU. I will never forget this nice old lady saying, “Helen, it will be marvellous, because now there will enough money for the Government to reopen the A&E in Bishop hospital.” That is obviously not what the Government have in mind. It is incumbent on them to be open and clear with the British public, and that is what new clauses 17 and 80 are driving at.

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): We have all heard the famous phrase “a week is a long time in politics”. Well, it has now been almost 18 months since the public voted to leave the EU and in that time lots of new issues have come to light. From leaving the single market and customs union, to the renewed tensions over the Irish border, we know things now that voters could not have been expected to know all those months ago. We also know that the Brexit divorce bill is likely to cost the Treasury upwards of £50 billion. That is almost £2,000 per household that could have been put to more positive use but instead becomes the opportunity cost of Brexit. Some people will say, “That’s money that would have been paid to the EU anyway”, and to some extent they are right. The difference is, however, that the money we paid to the EU in the past bought us collective benefits and access to shared resources, such as Euratom and the European Medicines Agency, that are now at risk as a result of Brexit.

Tom Brake: I am not sure whether the hon. Member for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie) listed as one of the costs of Brexit all the costs to us as a nation—individually—of establishing all the agencies we currently share with the EU.

Dr Williams: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his remarks. We have no idea how much extra it is going to cost us to establish our own agencies to cover the roles of the many European agencies we have shared. This opportunity cost is not simply about the raw cash we need to spend; it is also about the time and other resources devoted to making this happen. When I stood for election to Parliament, I had in my mind a long list of issues I wanted to address and ideas I wanted to drive forward to make this country a better and fairer place. Instead, I find that much of the time in this House is now being devoted to tackling the myriad problems that have arisen, and working to reduce the harm that may come to our country and our economy from leaving the EU.

This whole process is not just an opportunity cost—it is also an opportunity lost. Nobody in my constituency who voted to leave the EU voted to make our NHS worse off. They wanted to see it improve and, if anything, were persuaded by a somewhat misleading figure on the side of a bus, but the threats to our health services are very real. Just yesterday, Dr Jeanette Dickson, from the Royal College of Radiologists told the Health Committee that the isotopes we import for cancer treatments could be rendered useless by delays in the customs process. Quite simply she told us, “If we do not have an assured supply, the reduction in rate of cure means more people will die of thyroid cancer.” That is thousands of lives every year that will be at risk if we get this wrong.
[Dr Paul Williams]

Voters did not vote to make their family poorer either; they genuinely wanted to see our economy thrive and believed that exiting the EU would bring renewed prosperity for their families. But with slowed economic growth, a collapse in the value of the pound and rising costs of imports, that flourishing economic future seems a far cry from this Government’s current performance.

Ian Paisley: Earlier in this debate, I was accused of having an extreme view on something. Is it not rather extreme to suggest that people are going to die of cancer because of this? Seriously, listen to yourself!

Dr Williams: I recommend that the hon. Gentleman looks at what was said by the expert who provided evidence to the Health Committee yesterday. She explained what would happen if we get this wrong—what I suggested was conditional, because I said “if” we get this wrong. She said that radio isotopes that we do not produce currently in the UK and need to import from other European countries, and that are essential for cancer treatment, will not be available to provide that treatment.

7.30 pm

Carol Monaghan: Just to add a little more on that, these isotopes often have a half-life of six hours, which means that within 24 hours they are effectively useless for treatment. We do not have the ability to produce them here so they must be imported. If we are not part of the Euratom treaty, we will have serious problems with cancer treatment. It is not scaremongering, it is fact.

Dr Williams: I thank the hon. Lady for adding to the evidence. We must listen to the evidence.

As we know, the proposals before us would require the divorce bill to be assessed by independent watchdogs, and I support that. It is important that the information that comes out of the Government’s negotiations with the EU is properly scrutinised in this Chamber and beyond. As a scientist, I learned to follow evidence. When new evidence emerges, so must our course of action change. As a doctor, if a test carried out on a patient revealed a totally unexpected result, I would repeat the test again rather than plough on with a process that I thought would harm the patient. For some years, medical professionals used to say that smoking was not a risk to people’s health, and they also used to tell pregnant mothers that moderate drinking during pregnancy posed no risk to the health of their child. With the benefit of hindsight, new information and the evidence we have now, how ridiculous do those statements seem?

We must continue to keep an open mind and to scrutinise the divorce-bill negotiations and Brexit more widely. As the opportunities seem to diminish and the potential for harm to our economy and society increases, we must also be willing to ask whether this is what the public voted for. Yes, we have a duty to act on behalf of our constituents, but as representatives, not simply delegates. I promised the residents of Stockton South that I would fight and work for them all, regardless of how they voted. The public must have the right to change their minds; that is one of the key aspects of democracy. It is why we have elections every five years—or perhaps more often. If public opinion shifts, we must all be able to look at matters again.

Attention to detail and accountability to Parliament are crucial to the Brexit process, and particularly the divorce bill. That is why I shall support new clauses 17 and 80 tonight.

Graham Stringer rose—

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op) rose—

The Temporary Chair (David Hanson): Order. I am happy to call both hon. Members—indeed, I have no discretion not to call the hon. Members for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) and for Ilford South (Mike Gapes)—but I must point out that they have not been present since the start of the debate. I have no discretion on this matter, so I call Graham Stringer.

Graham Stringer: I am grateful for your comments, Mr Hanson. You are right I have not been present in this particular debate for the whole time, but I have been in many of the debates and this is the first time I have stood up to speak on the issue. I shall not detain the Committee for very long.

Following on from the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams), of course people in every democracy have the right to change their minds. The correct way to do that is through the same means by which the referendum came about in the first place: a political party should say in its general election manifesto that it wants a referendum, win that election and hold another referendum. The Lib Dems tried that at the most recent election; admittedly, they gained seats, but they lost votes. That is the way to do it, not by calling on the most immediate opinion poll.

Opinion polls change. My hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South and other Members may be interested in a poll taken by Lord Ashcroft the day after the referendum. He surveyed all those people who had voted for Brexit and found that 94% of them had not voted for it on economic grounds, so a lot of the arguments about economics do not apply to the people who voted to leave.

Peter Kyle: To clarify a point, the 2015 Labour manifesto opposed a referendum; Labour was led then by my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband). Two weeks after the general election, we were whipped to vote for the piece of legislation that enabled that, and the Labour party did so. Did my hon. Friend think that we were wrong because it was not in our manifesto? We opposed a referendum in the manifesto.

Graham Stringer: I have to say that I found it a bit curious, having voted for a referendum for many years, to find all my Labour colleagues finally in the same Lobby as me. The argument given by the leadership at the time was that the election had been lost, the public had voted by a majority for a referendum and it was going to recognise that.

On the financial issues, I am always in favour of transparency, which is what the essence of this argument is about. It is difficult for any Member not to be in favour of transparency, but with regard to the actual
wording of the amendments, they are rather biased in terms of costs and do not, as I would have preferred, put the savings in the context of what we do not have to spend. As has been said, in all certainty, net, there will be a saving. People argue that there will be huge costs to leaving the EU. I do not know what the Government are likely to pay or not pay. I suspect that they will end up paying too much, but if we look at the history of the common market and the EU, over that period, we have probably paid half a trillion pounds net—a huge amount of money. What has been the benefit of that? We have gone from having a balanced trade with the EU to running a deficit of about £70 billion a year.

Mr Leslie: I am incredibly grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. I accept the point that there could be savings or, in my view, much bigger costs, but could we put the savings in the context of what we do not have to spend?

Graham Stringer: I do not know what decisions will be made. I believe that the Government are likely to pay too much. Let us ask ourselves: why would we be paying money so that the rest of the EU can trade with us and every year sell us £70 billion more in goods than we are selling to the EU? Why is that a deal that we should be keen to support? I suspect that the Government will come back and put it to—

Stella Creasy: Whatever my hon. Friend’s feelings towards the European Union, he has just said that he fears that we may pay too much, whatever the number is. New clause 17 is about knowing what that number is. Surely he must support that principle. Then we can answer the question about whether it is too much, not enough or completely irrelevant.

Graham Stringer: I hope that my hon. Friend was listening to me when I was arguing in favour of transparency. I was arguing against the particular wording of these amendments, which I believe to be biased. Of course we should be transparent about what things cost, and we should have the right to have a view and determine what we think about that. Who could argue against that? All I am saying is that, if we are paying £40 billion over 40 years, that is probably against £400 billion that we would be paying, and that should be the context in which these figures are produced.

Wera Hobhouse rose—

Graham Stringer: I am sorry about this, Mr Hanson. I will not give way again after this intervention, because I did say that I would not take much time.

Wera Hobhouse: As a member of the Labour party, the hon. Gentleman should understand the word “solidarity”. He has just been talking about the fact that Europe is much more than just a financial project. Is this not about European solidarity and we, as one of the richest countries in the world, acting in solidarity with people and countries in eastern Europe, which, for decades, have been losing out? Now we are helping those countries and their democracies to thrive.

Graham Stringer: There could be a very long answer to that question, which I will not give. All I will say is that the EU—and this is one of my reasons for voting to leave it—has had a hostile view to democracy and national sovereignty from its very conception. I believe that we should have solidarity with those countries that are moving towards democracy and improving the rights of their citizens, but I have never believed that the EU is a body that can do that.

There has been an assumption in the debate not only that the finances and paying for a trade deal would be good things, but that most of the regulations that came from Europe have been good and most of the application of those regulations has been good. There are many regulations that are not good. The clinical trials directive is the obvious one, which I have discussed with my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie) previously, but there are many others, including the electromagnetic field directive, which nearly wrecked much of our medicine. There has been an anti-scientific view from the EU that has stopped the development of genetically modified organisms in the EU. One has to take a balanced view. There have been good things from the EU, but there have also been many negative and bad things.

Finally, the essence of many comments that have been made today is that it is difficult to become an independent country. These are essentially the arguments of imperialists. It is not that difficult for a powerful economy such as ours to take over its own democracy and become independent again.

Mike Gapes: I was here for seven hours on Monday before I spoke, so I feel that I can say at least a few words today.

We face a fundamental choice in this debate. Are we still a parliamentary democracy, or do we simply—because of a very narrow vote on 23 June 2016—take our eyes off of the detail and go like lemmings towards anything in order to implement a decision that is thought to be irreversible? The leave campaign told us that it was about taking back control. The reality is that this Parliament must assert itself and take back control from an overweening and incompetent Executive who want Henry VIII powers in their Bill and wish us just to be supine—to lie down and accept anything that they come forward with.

That is why my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie) tabled new clause 17, which I am delighted to support. It would mean that there has to be an independent assessment of the costs of the Government’s proposals. We in this House—this democratic Parliament—can then assert centuries-old tradition against overweening Executive power. We can decide democratically. We can assert and take back control. That is why we need to vote for new clause 17 and support the associated amendments.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker): I thank right hon. and hon. Members for their participation in this debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie) on his new clause, because he has achieved a considerable widening of the debate’s scope, which has led to a wide range of contributions.

Clause 12 is not about paying any negotiated financial settlement. It is about ensuring that Parliament has authorised the Government and the devolved Administrations to incur expenditure under this Bill. It is also about the preparation for the making of statutory
instruments under the powers of the Bill or under existing powers to make subordinate legislation as modified by or under the Bill. The clause has two functions. The main text of the clause is concerned with parliamentary approval for the Government to spend money. The clause also gives effect to schedule 4, which is concerned with fees and charges by which the Government, devolved Administrations and arm's-length bodies raise money.

Clause 12 and schedule 4 will ensure that all the money that might flow into and out of the Exchequer as a consequence of this Bill is proper and respects the long-established rules for the relationship between this House and the Treasury, as laid down in the 1932 Public Accounts Committee concordat and the Treasury guidance in “Managing public money”.

Taking back control of functions the UK has long delegated to European Union institutions may cost money. That expenditure will come from the use of the powers in the Bill. Although at this stage in the negotiations it is too early to say precisely what that expenditure will be, it might involve expanding public authorities in the UK, recruitment at those authorities or setting up new IT systems. That is not to say that the UK cannot perform those functions more efficiently and, crucially, at a lower cost than the European Union, but clearly we cannot say that it will cost the Government nothing at all to carry out the new responsibilities. It is therefore vital that the financial aspects of taking back control and preparing to take a fully independent position on the world stage are put on a sound and proper footing.

7.45 pm

Clause 12 is a technical clause that is designed to ensure that Parliament has had an opportunity formally to signal its assent to expenditure once the Bill has been passed. The Committee will realise that we are debating the authorisation of expenditure under the powers in the Bill before we debate the powers themselves. The debate on those powers is for another day, when the Government will set out the importance of those powers remaining to ensure that we can effectively correct deficiencies in the statute book arising from our withdrawal in time for exit day. There can surely be no argument about the need to be properly prepared.

Schedule 4 will mitigate the burden of taking on new functions on the general taxpayer. It ensures that fees and charges that are currently made in relation to retained EU law, such as the cost of Kimberley process diamond certificates, can continue to be modified as costs rise and fall, and that new fees and charges can be made, for example to replace those being made by the EU, such as for the regulation of chemicals. That will ensure that those who benefit from the functions transferred from the EU to the UK pay for them and that taxpayers, both corporate and individual, do not end up paying for services provided to others.

Stephen Timms: Does the Minister accept that we should hope that those fees and charges will be lower than those that have been paid until now to EU institutions?

Mr Baker: I am happy to tell the right hon. Gentleman that, as a good Conservative, I certainly hope to reduce the costs on businesses and individuals. I will come to his amendments in a moment.

New clause 17 and amendment 54 show an understandable desire to protect the role of this House, but they are not necessary. The Government have always been clear that the negotiated financial settlement will be part of our withdrawal agreement and that the House will be given a vote on that agreement. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union was very clear on 13 November when he announced the withdrawal agreement and implementation Bill. He said that, as one of the principal elements of our agreement with the EU, we expect that legislation to include authorisation to pay any financial settlement that is negotiated with the EU. The Bill we are debating today is about ensuring that the statute book is operational on exit day, not about paying any settlement. The same argument applies to new clause 80.

Mr Leslie: The Minister says that there will be an opportunity to vote on the finances, but only as part of the entirety of the proposed withdrawal agreement. Would it not be proper, as is the case with many other financial issues, for the House separately to authorise financial expenditure in relation to exiting the European Union? Surely the Government should commit to that power for the House of Commons, or will he deny us that opportunity?

Mr Baker: I am confused by the hon. Gentleman, because he is such a diligent Member of the House. I explained moments ago that we will bring forward the withdrawal agreement and implementation Bill, which will cover any financial settlement, among other withdrawal issues. I would of course expect that Bill to go through the normal legislative processes, during which he and other right hon. and hon. Gentlemen will have a full opportunity to scrutinise those provisions.

I turn to the amendments tabled by the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms). The power in part 1 of schedule 4 can be used to create fees and charges of the type that amendment 153 is concerned with. That power can be used to establish new fees only in relation to functions being transferred to UK entities under the powers in this Bill. In most cases, one might expect that it will be replacing a fee set at EU level, but in some cases it may be right that it will be better value for the taxpayer and for users of the services to create a new fee to pay for functions that the UK previously funded through the EU budget.

Amendment 152 does not recognise the need for adjustments to other, peripheral aspects of the fees regime in connection with charging fees or other charges—for example, arrangements for refunds, which I think all Members can agree should be possible so as not to leave ordinary hard-working fee payers unfairly out of pocket. Furthermore, future Governments, in the fullness of time, may wish to simplify charges, amalgamate them, or charge less for one function or another.

Stephen Timms: In future it may be necessary to do all sorts of things, but surely the powers in this Bill should not be used to impose new charges on businesses that are not being paid at the moment.

Mr Baker: This Bill, first and foremost, is about exiting the European Union successfully, with certainty, continuity and control, as the right hon. Gentleman will know. I draw his attention to schedule 2(7), which makes it very clear that in the event that a provision...
imposed a fee or charge, or conferred a power to sub-delegate, it would go to the affirmative procedure and this House would have the opportunity to vote on it.

I turn to amendment 339 on sub-delegation. It is right that this House keeps strict control over all financial matters, but this Bill is about ensuring continuity. I remind the Committee that this power is available only if the public authority is taking on a new—[Interruption.]

The Temporary Chairman (David Hanson): I am sorry to interrupt the Minister, but there is quite a lot of hubble and bubble from Members who have not been in the debate. Members who have been here for the past three hours wish to listen to the Minister’s response.

Mr Baker: Thank you, Mr Hanson.

The power is available only if the public authority is taking on a new function under this Bill, and the fees and charges must be in connection with that function. The amendment would force Ministers to exercise this power on behalf of public authorities, such as the Financial Conduct Authority, which this House has made statutorily independent from Ministers. The Government believe that it is right that where Parliament has already granted the power to set up rules within these independent regulators, fees and charges of the type envisaged by this power should continue to be exercised by those public authorities. For good reasons, they have been made independent of Government, and Parliament should have the option to maintain that status quo. I stress that the terms on which any public authority would be able to raise fees and other charges will be set in the statutory instrument that delegates the power to them; and that, as I said, any such delegation would trigger the affirmative procedure, ensuring that this House considers and approves any delegation of the power and how it would be exercised.

Amendment 340 on cost recovery has the disadvantage that it would prohibit what I hope Labour Members would consider to be progressive principles of ensuring a spreading of the burden of regulation. It also might not allow regulators to cover the cost of enforcement.

Clause 12 and schedule 4 are about delivering a successful EU exit with certainty, continuity and control. Clause 12 is not about enabling the payment of any negotiated financial settlement, and neither is schedule 4 about subverting the normal process of raising taxation. The amendments muddy the waters of what these provisions are for. These provisions are simply about ensuring that the financial aspects of taking back control and preparing to take a fully independent position on the world stage are put on a sound and proper footing.

Stella Creasy: The Minister said that he thought that all the amendments muddled the water, but he has also said that it was right that Parliament should have a vote on the money—on the divorce bill—and that there should be parliamentary oversight of any additional controls. Why then is he not going to accept amendments that simply ensure that that is the case? Just what kind of control is he seeking to take back?

Mr Baker: As the hon. Lady would expect me to say, what I want is Parliament to have proper control over our laws, our money, our borders and our trade policy. Having expressed my gratitude for her intervention, I hope that I have tackled right hon. and hon. Members’ concerns, and I urge them not to press the amendments.

Mr Leslie: I have heard what the Minister said. In fact, he even had the gall to use the phrase, “take back control” while simultaneously telling Parliament that it cannot have a separate, free-standing vote on this massive divorce bill, which will potentially cost the constituents of every single Member in the Chamber—every man, woman and child—up to £1,000 a head. They expect accountability for those decisions, and I want all those hon. Members, particularly those who advocated a hard Brexit, and who still potentially advocate going over the cliff edge into World Trade Organisation terrain, to walk through the Lobby and be held accountable for the amount of money that it will cost taxpayers for decades to come. That is why I do not wish to withdraw new clause 17. I believe that Parliament should exercise control over those amounts of money. Let us take back control and have accountability for those sums of money. I wish to push this to a vote.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The Committee divided: Ayes 288, Noes 316.

Division No. 58] [7.56 pm

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Lammy, rh Mr David  
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Lee, Miş Karen  
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Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma  
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Mahmod, Shabana  
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McGinn, rh Conor  
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Barclay, Stephen  
Baron, Mr John  
Bebb, Guto  
Bellingham, Sir Henry  
Benyon, rh Richard  
Beresford, Sir Paul  
Berry, Jake  
Blackman, Bob  
Blunt, Crispin  
Boles, Nick  
Bone, Mr Peter  
Bottomley, Sir Peter  
Bowie, Andrew  
Bradley, Ben  
Bradley, rh Karen  
Brady, Mr Graham  
Bremerton, Jack  
Bridgen, Andrew  
Brine, Steve  
Brokenhire, rh James  
Bruce, Fiona  
Buckland, Robert  
Burghart, Alex  
Burns, Conor  
Tami, Mark  
Theil, Alison  
Thomas, Gareth  
Symonds, Nick  
Thornberry, rh Emily  
Timms, rh Stephen  
Trickett, Jon  
Turner, Karl  
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Twigg, Stephen  
Twist, Liz  
Umunna, Chuka  
Vaz, Valerie  
Walker, Thelma  
Watson, Tom  
West, Catherine  
Western, M  
Whitehead, Dr Alan  
Whitfield, Martin  
Whitford, Dr Philippa  
Williams, Hywel  
Williams, rh Dr Paul  
Williamson, Chris  
Wilson, Phil  
Wishtart, Pete  
Woodcock, John  
Yasin, Mohammad  
Zeichner, Daniel  

**Tellers for the Ayes:**  
Stephen Doughty and  
Patrick Grady

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**NOES**

Burt, rh Alistair  
Cairns, rh Alun  
Campbell, Mr Gregory  
Cartlidge, James  
Cash, Sir William  
Caulfield, Maria  
Chalk, Alex  
Chishti, Rehman  
Chope, Mr Christopher  
Churchill, Jo  
Clark, Colin  
Clark, rh Greg  
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth  
Clarke, Mr Simon  
Cleverly, James  
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey  
Coffey, Dr Thérèse  
Collins, Damian  
Costa, Alberto  
Courts, Robert  
Cox, Mr Geoffrey  
Crabb, rh Stephen  
Crouch, Tracey  
Davies, Chris  
Davies, David T. C.  
Davies, Glynn  
Davies, Mims  
Davies, Philip  
Davies, rh Mr David  
Dinenage, Caroline  
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan  
Docherty, Leo  
Dodds, rh Nigel  
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.  
Donelan, Michelle  
Dorries, Ms Nadine  
Double, Steve
European Union (Withdrawal) Bill

6 DECEMBER 2017

European Union (Withdrawal) Bill

Clerks to the House of Commons

...giving its independent assessment of the Treasury’s estimate. Together with reports from the Office of Budget Responsibility, an estimate of the financial obligations incurred by the United Kingdom during the period of its membership of the EU, agreed as part of any withdrawal agreement under Article 50 of the Treaty of the European Union.

(3) The Treasury must lay before both Houses of Parliament its independent assessment of the financial obligations incurred by the United Kingdom during the period of its membership of the EU, together with reports from the Office of Budget Responsibility, the National Audit Office and the Government Actuary giving its independent assessment of the Treasury’s estimate.

Question accordingly negatived.

New Clause 80

TRANSPARENCY OF THE FINANCIAL SETTLEMENT

(1) Financial provision may be made for a financial settlement agreed as part of any withdrawal agreement under Article 50 of the Treaty of the European Union.

(2) Subsection 1 applies only if the financial settlement honours obligations incurred by the United Kingdom during the period of its membership of the EU.

(3) The Treasury must lay before both Houses of Parliament an estimate of the financial obligations incurred by the United Kingdom during the period of its membership of the EU, together with reports from the Office of Budget Responsibility, the National Audit Office and the Government Actuary giving its independent assessment of the Treasury’s estimate.
(4) Any financial settlement payment to the European Commission or any other EU entity may be made only in accordance with regulations made by a Minister of the Crown.

(5) Regulations under subsection (4) may be made only if a draft of the regulations has been laid before, and approved by resolution of, the House of Commons.——(Jenny Chapman.)

This new clause ensures that any financial settlement as part of leaving the EU must reflect obligations incurred by the UK during its membership of the EU, must be transparent, and must be approved by Parliament.

Brought up, and read the First time.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The Committee divided: Ayes 287, Noes 312.

Division No. 59] [8.11 pm

AYES

Abbot, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniacci, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, lan
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Joanna
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chapman, Douglas
Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Crawley, Angela
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon

Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Mr Mark
Hendry, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hermon, Lady
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollern, Kate
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Azfal
Kilien, Ged
Kinnoch, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Lee, Ms Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
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
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Steward Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John

McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
Meams, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Norris, Alex
O’Hara, Brendan
Onasanya, Fiona
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Pidcock, Laura
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christine
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rodd, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Snel, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Question accordingly negatwed.

Clause 12 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule 4

POWERS IN CONNECTION WITH FEES AND CHARGES

Amendment proposed: No. 339, page 33, leave out lines 1 to 3.—(Jenny Chapman.)

This amendment would remove the power of public authorities to levy fees or charges via tertiary legislation.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Committee divided: Ayes 286, Noes 311.

Division No. 60] [8.29 pm

AYES

Blackford, rh Ian  Byrne, rh Liam
Blackman, Kirsty  Cadbury, Ruth
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta  Cameron, Dr Lisa
Blomfield, Paul  Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Brabin, Tracy  Carden, Dan
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben  Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Brake, rh Tom  Chapman, Douglas
Brock, Deidre  Chapman, Jenny
Brown, Alan  Charalampos, Bambos
Brown, Lyn  Cherry, Joanna
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas  Coaker, Vernon
Buck, Ms Karen  Coffey, Ann
Burdett-Coutts  Cooper, Julie
Burnham, Sir Greg  Cooper, Rosie
Burton, David  Cooper, rh Yvette
Burr, rh Barry  Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Butler, Richard  Cowan, Ronnie
Butler, Dawn  Coyle, Neil
Crawley, Angela  Creasy, Stella
Craddes, Jon  Crich, John
Cryer, John  Cummings, Judith
Cunningham, Alex  Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic  Davey, rh Sir Edward
Davies, Geraint  David, Wayne
Day, Martyn  Davies, Anneliese
De Cordova, Marsha  Doughty, Stephen
De Piero, Gloria  Dowd, Peter
Dent Coad, Emma  Drew, Dr David
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh  Dromey, Jack
Docherty-Hughes, Martin  Duffield, Rosie
Dodds, Anneliese  Eagle, Ms Angela
Doughty, Stephen  Eagle, Maria
Dowd, Anna  Edwards, Jonathan
Dover, Dr David  Efford, Clive
Dromey, Jack  Elliott, Julie
Duffield, Rosie  Ellman, Mrs Louise
Davies, Geraint  Elmore, Chris
Day, Martyn  Eatson, Bill
De Cordova, Marsha  Evans, Chris
De Piero, Gloria  Farnell, Paul
Dent Coad, Emma  Farron, Tim
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh  Fitzpatrick, Jim
Docherty-Hughes, Martin  Fletcher, Colleen
Dodds, Anna  Flint, rh Caroline
Doughty, Stephen  Flynn, Paul
Douglas, rh Ms Mary  Fovargue, Yvonne
Dwyer, Dr David  Foxcroft, Vicky
Friedberg, Jonathan  Frith, James
Frith, Spring  Furniss, Gill
Fry, Dr David  Gaffney, Hugh
Gates, Mike  George, Ruth
Gething, Stephen  Gethin, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia  Gil, Preet Kaur
Gill, rh Stephen  Gilmore, Diana
Glindon, Mary  Glindon, Mary
Godsil, Mhairi  Godsil, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen  Goodwin, Stephen
Grady, Patrick  Grant, Peter
Green, Kate  Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Lilian  Griffith, Nia
Greenwood, Lilian  Grogan, John
Griffin, Dr Caroline  Gwynne, Andrew
Grundy, Tony  Haigh, Louise
Grundy, Tony  Hamilton, Fabian
Grahame, Torger  Hardy, Emma
Greer, Carolin  Harman, Ms Harriet
Grenfell, Mark  Harris, Carolyn
Greenhill, Simon  Hayes, Helen
Greenhill, Simon  Hayman, Sue
Greenfield, Al  Healey, rh John
Greenfield, Al  Henderson, Mr Mark
Greenwood, Lilian  Hendry, Drew
Greene, Dr Simon  Hepburn, Dr Stephen
Greene, Simon  Hermon, Lady
Greene, Simon  Hill, Mike
Greenwood, Lilian  Hillier, Meg
Greenwood, Lilian  Hobhouse, Wera
Greenwood, Lilian  Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Greenwood, Lilian  Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Greenwood, Lilian  Hollern, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian  Howarth, rh Mr George
Greenwood, Lilian  Huq, Dr Rupa
Greenwood, Lilian  Hussain, Imran
Greenwood, Lilian  Jardine, Christine
Greenwood, Lilian  Jarvis, Dan
Greenwood, Lilian  Johnson, Diana
Greenwood, Lilian  Jones, Darren
Greenwood, Lilian  Jones, Gerald
Greenwood, Lilian  Jones, Graham P.
Greenwood, Lilian  Jones, Helen
Greenwood, Lilian  Jones, Mr Kevan
Greenwood, Lilian  Jones, Sarah
Greenwood, Lilian  Jones, Susan Elan
Greenwood, Lilian  Kanie, Mike
Greenwood, Lilian  Kendall, Liz
Greenwood, Lilian  Khan, Afzal
Greenwood, Lilian  Killen, Ged
Greenwood, Lilian  Kninock, Stephen
Greenwood, Lilian  Kyle, Peter
Greenwood, Lilian  Laird, Lesley
Greenwood, Lilian  Lake, Ben
Greenwood, Lilian  Lamb, rh Norman
Greenwood, Lilian  Lammy, rh Mr David
Greenwood, Lilian  Lavery, Ian
Greenwood, Lilian  Law, Chris
Greenwood, Lilian  Lee, Ms Karen
Greenwood, Lilian  Leslie, Mr Chris
Greenwood, Lilian  Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Greenwood, Lilian  Lewis, Clive
Greenwood, Lilian  Linden, David
Greenwood, Lilian  Lloyd, Stephen
Greenwood, Lilian  Lloyd, Tony
Greenwood, Lilian  Long Bailey, Rebecca
Greenwood, Lilian  Lucas, Caroline
Greenwood, Lilian  Lucas, Ian C.
Greenwood, Lilian  Lynch, Holly
Greenwood, Lilian  Madders, Justin
Greenwood, Lilian  Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Greenwood, Lilian  Mahmood, Shabana
Greenwood, Lilian  Malhotra, Seema
Greenwood, Lilian  Mann, John
Greenwood, Lilian  Marsden, Gordon
Greenwood, Lilian  Martin, Sandy
Greenwood, Lilian  Maskell, Rachael
Greenwood, Lilian  Matheson, Christian
Greenwood, Lilian  Mc Nally, John
Greenwood, Lilian  McCabe, Steve
Greenwood, Lilian  McCarthy, Kerry
Greenwood, Lilian  McDonagh, Siobhain
Greenwood, Lilian  McDonald, Andy
Tellers for the Ayes:
Thangam Debbonaire and Nick Smith

NOES

Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriet
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin

Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Beretton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve

Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burton, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartledge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chisht, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colm
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey

davies, Chris
davies, David T. C.
davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davies, rh Mr David
Dinianne, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey

Mc

Donelan, Michelle
Donnies, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard

Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain

Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Eustice, George
Evennett, rh David
Fabricant, Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Francis, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy

Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fysh, rh Marcus
Garner, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hand, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Nick
Jack, rh Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kacwyczynski, Daniel
Kesegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Marsha De Cordova: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Following the Chancellor’s comments today scapegoating disabled people as a reason for low productivity, can you advise me on whether he will be coming to the House to make a statement on this important issue, and an apology?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Lady for giving me notice of her point of order. I have received no notification that the Chancellor wishes to come to the House to make a statement, but those on the Treasury Bench will have heard her concerns and I am sure that she will find ways to pursue the matter.
Social Homes for Rent

Motion made, and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn.—(Graham Stuart.)

8.44 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I asked for this Adjournment debate for two reasons: first, because the Minister for Housing and Planning declined to call in a planning decision in my constituency under which 99 social homes for rent will be lost in a big regeneration scheme; and, secondly, because in the recent Budget, which was meant to be the housing Budget, the Chancellor did not once mention social homes for rent. The two are linked.

The social housing association that will deliver the regeneration at Foxhill in my constituency is being forced to act like a private developer because no public subsidies have been given and the regeneration must be self-funding. Some 70% of the new homes built on the site will be sold privately, and the remaining 30% will be split between social homes for rent and a shared ownership scheme, which is where it becomes non-transparent. The Government put the two together, yet there is a world of difference between them. Thousands of families will never be able to put down a deposit even for a shared ownership home. All they can afford is a decent home for rent, yet the number of homes built for social rent has fallen dramatically.

Government statistics show that nearly 40,000 social homes for rent were built in 2010-11, and the figure for 2016-17 was just 5,380. In the 2016-17 financial year, homes for rent were built in 2010-11, and the figure for rent has fallen dramatically.

Why is that? I ask the Minister whether it is an ideological split between social homes for rent and a shared ownership sector and in home ownership, but that is an unattainable position he and his Government are taking. If it is not, why is that? I ask the Minister whether it is an ideological position he and his Government are taking. If it is not, why not give local authorities and social housing associations the tools and the finance to provide what their communities are asking for?

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Does the hon. Lady agree that one of the problems with the way in which the Government currently deal with authorities such as mine in Stroud that actually own the stock is that there is an artificial cap on borrowing and, worse, for every house sold 70% still goes back to the Treasury? That cannot be fair, can it?

Wera Hobhouse: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point. The Budget also announced that the cap on local authorities’ housing revenue accounts will finally be lifted, but only in high-demand areas. It has not been clarified how authorities will apply, which makes it difficult for local councils.

People on low incomes, people working on zero-hours contracts and people on universal credit increasingly have nowhere to go except into social housing, which exists as a safety net provided by the state for people who are just about managing.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the hon. Lady agree that every constituency has a real need for social housing that is available for decent rent and that is fit for purpose? The need for appropriate housing has been magnified by the implementation of the bedroom tax, which sees families being penalised because their local authority has no available housing to fit them. Does she further agree that major steps must be taken either to meet that need or to lift this tax from those who are unable to move to a smaller house due to the lack of appropriate housing in their area?

Wera Hobhouse: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman. The coalition Government started the bedroom tax when I was a councillor in a local authority where the unfairness of the tax became obvious, particularly because the local authority did not have the houses to rehouse people in smaller accommodation. The bedroom tax is just a penalty for people who are already struggling.

If the Government think this safety net of social homes is working just fine, Grenfell Tower stands as a tragic example to show that it is not. Today, the homelessness charity Shelter has given the facts and figures on homelessness and those in temporary accommodation as of now. Its report reveals a trend that is getting worse each year. A shocking 128,000 children in Britain will wake up homeless and in temporary accommodation this Christmas. That is one in every 111 children in this country and their parents, living in emergency bed and breakfasts and hostels, which are widely considered by experts in this field to be the worst type of temporary accommodation. Let us be clear: one in every 111 children in Britain would not be living in emergency B&Bs or hostels this Christmas if there were more social housing. All the Government’s talk about affordable homes does not house a single one of these children and their parents.

We know that this Government believe in the private sector and in home ownership, but that is an unattainable dream for millions and millions of people. We need an effective supply of homes to rent in this country. The private sector can be part of the solution, but it is staggering that this Government resist proposals and fail effectively to support new social homes for rent. Why is that? I ask the Minister whether it is an ideological position he and his Government are taking. If it is not, why not give local authorities and social housing associations the tools and the finance to provide what their communities are asking for?

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): One problem we have in Scotland, as my hon. Friend will know, is the housing debt that Scottish local authorities are landed with—it is like a colossus. We spend our time trying to service this debt, which gets in the way of building houses for people who need them, as she says. I hope that at some stage Her Majesty’s Government will look at getting rid of this housing debt, which is crippling and is standing in the way of homes being built for people who need them.

Wera Hobhouse: My hon. Friend is making a good point. That is the reason why 50% of local authorities no longer own their social housing stock; they were encouraged to give it over to social housing associations in order to write off that historical debt. That has created other problems, and this is exactly what I am talking about tonight.

Let me talk briefly about Foxhill, in my constituency, as an example. My housing association tells me that it needs from Government in order to increase the numbers of social homes is non-recoverable grant funding—recoverable loans will not serve this purpose. The Homes and Communities Agency’s grant funding under the national affordable housing programme does not provide funding for new social homes to rent over and above those required by a section 106 agreement. However, funding is available for affordable rent and
shared ownership. In a high-value area such as Bath, where affordability is a particular issue for local residents, converting homes to social rent which would otherwise be sold on the open market requires a significant level of grant—it is in the region of around £200,000 for a house that would be worth £350,000 if it were sold on the private market. As I have already said, my housing association cannot get this grant funding. What is the result for the people who live on Foxhill? There are of course some who are set to benefit from the replacement of their post-war units by modern units, but residents who have been encouraged to buy their own home under the right to buy and have done so now face the prospect of having their home and their neighbourhood destroyed. That is something they never asked for and never expected to happen.

What about the 99 most vulnerable families, who will now simply be moved out of their home city of Bath? They cannot stay because there will be 99 fewer social homes for rent under the current plans. This sort of social cleansing is unacceptable and it gives the Government the reputation of being uncaring. The Minister will know that I requested him to call in the planning decision that reduced the number of social homes for rent by 99, but he refused to do so. The implication is that this reduction in social homes for rent is in line with Government policy, but on Monday the Secretary of State, in a quick reply, said it was not Government policy to reduce the number of social homes to rent. It cannot be both things in this specific instance, so what is the answer?

Let me return to the Budget. The Chancellor announced a reduction in stamp duty for first-time buyers. That might help the few, but not the many. The Government announced a lifting of the borrowing cap on local authorities in high-demand areas, which is of no use in most areas. In my high-demand constituency of Bath, the local authority has long since transferred its social housing stock to the housing association, to which the lifting of the borrowing cap does not apply.

Will the Government come clean on their plans for social homes? On Monday, the Secretary of State confirmed that, as I had suspected, the Government have no plan for social housing. There is no strategy and there are no policies; rather, they have walked away from their responsibility to the poorest and most vulnerable, handing it all back to cash-strapped local authorities. To cover their failure, they conflate social housing with affordable housing stock to the housing association, to which the lifting of the borrowing cap does not apply.

Let me be clear that providing safe, secure and affordable homes for those who need them most is an absolute priority for the Government. The hon. Lady talked about some statistics; let me give her some more. Since 2010, more than 357,000 new affordable homes have been delivered, including around 128,000 homes for social rent. Our recent announcement of an extra £2 billion for the affordable homes programme takes the total budget to £9 billion over 2016-21. That will help to deliver a wide range of affordable housing, including social-rent homes.

I say gently to the hon. Lady that it is not fair to say that the Government somehow do not care about social housing or the people who live in it. I shall talk a bit more about that, but she should not take my word for it. Listen to what people in the social housing sector have been saying. David Orr, the chief executive of the National Housing Federation, described the extra funding that has been announced as “a watershed moment for the nation.”

Wera Hobhouse: In that case, I encourage the Minister to explain to local authorities and social housing associations in clear terms how this mechanism to deliver social homes in local authorities is going to work—and will he do it quickly, please?

Alok Sharma: I shall address those issues in my speech. We have a constant dialogue with housing associations and, of course, local councils.

Let me set out some of the recent announcements that will help to make sure that more affordable and social homes are built. Another announcement in recent weeks has been the one on rent certainty for social housing providers. From the conversations that I have had with the sector, including many people who run housing associations and, indeed, councils, I know that they are clear that it was an extremely welcome announcement. It will help to deliver social homes, faster, while also providing funding to maintain the current stock of homes.

The Budget was the biggest for housing in decades, with an extra £15 billion of support. That means there will be at least £44 billion of support for housing over the next five years. That is going to provide a big boost for housing throughout the country. Of course, the Chancellor also announced the decision to increase the local authority housing revenue account borrowing caps by a total of £1 billion, targeted at areas of high affordability pressure. Collectively, these decisions herald a boost for the building of social homes. But, of course, we know there is more to do.

Jamie Stone: I must press the Minister on housing debt. In the previous financial year, the Highland Council’s housing debt was of the order of £205 million. That means that 40p out of every pound that is received in rent goes to service that debt. Surely the Minister can understand that that is crippling attempts to build new houses. What discussions has he had with the Chancellor about trying to get rid of housing debt?

Alok Sharma: Obviously, the hon. Gentleman represents a Scottish seat, and housing is a devolved matter. As we are talking about housing revenue accounts, I can inform Members that there is headroom, as at the end of
2016-17, of £3.5 billion across the country in housing revenue accounts. I know that councils are looking to build more homes. They are also working with housing associations, and this extra money will make a difference.

The hon. Lady talked about Grenfell Tower, which was an absolute tragedy for the country. Following that tragedy, the Prime Minister asked me to meet social housing tenants across the country to hear their views on social housing. I have now met more than 600 tenants from across the country and undertaken seven events, the latest being last week in Bridgwater, which is not too far from the hon. Lady’s constituency. By the end of January, I will have undertaken a further five such engagement events. The views of social housing tenants will inform the national approach that we will set out in the social housing Green Paper, which we aim to publish in spring next year.

I just want to record my grateful thanks to all the tenants I have met for sharing their experiences. This engagement tour has undoubtedly been one of the best things that I have ever done in my time as a Minister. It is very clear to me from these visits that, when it comes to fixing our broken housing market, it is not just about building more homes, but about improving the housing that we already have.

The Budget committed £400 million in loans for estate regeneration on top of the £322 million that has already been made available. The current programme is supporting more than 100 estates around the country. I am pleased to see that the Foxhill estate, which is in the hon. Lady’s constituency, is among them and has received £650,000 in capacity grant funding.

Wera Hobhouse: I thank the Minister for giving way again. What will he say to the 99 families who will not be housed in Bath and who will, basically, have to move outside the area because that is the only way that they can find a home to rent? That is what we call social cleansing. What will he say to those families?

Alok Sharma: Let me come on to talk about several issues around the Foxhill estate redevelopment. I want to be clear that the Government are committed to putting councils and communities in the driving seat when it comes to their housing needs. That was reinforced by the estate regeneration national strategy, published last year, which emphasised the need to engage residents and give council and housing association tenants the choice to return to their estate or other suitable housing options.

There are currently 414 affordable homes on the Foxhill estate. I understand that the proposed redevelopment, taken together with affordable homes proposed at the adjoining Mulberry Park development, will provide a total of 420 affordable homes. Bath and North East Somerset Council has said that the quantum of affordable homes proposed across the two sites will ensure that all existing residents of the Foxhill estate can be accommodated in the immediate area. I know that I will be meeting the hon. Lady before the recess, and I am sure that we can discuss social housing issues in more detail then as well.

These communities know their local area better than anyone and it therefore makes sense that planning decisions are made at a local level wherever possible. It was on that basis that the Secretary of State, after careful consideration, decided not to call in the application at the Foxhill estate. What is clear is that, ultimately, the only way of fixing the broken housing market is to build more homes, cross tenure, and to encourage a more diverse range of players into the market. That is why we are doing the following: backing small and medium-sized builders to grow, and there was more money for that in the Budget; supporting housing associations and local authorities to get building; encouraging more builders into the build-to-rent sector; and championing high standards in quality and design.

One of the biggest concerns for our constituents when it comes to new homes being built is that they will often feel that there is not accompanying infrastructure to support the new housing. That is why the Chancellor, in the Budget, committed a further £2.7 billion to the Housing Infrastructure Fund, taking the total to £5 billion. This will help local areas to unlock development through the provision of vital infrastructure. Of course, we want to see local authorities working together to champion new housing. It is therefore encouraging to hear that the four local planning authorities in the west of England, where the hon. Lady’s constituency is based, are working together to produce a joint plan to deliver the homes needed in the area. I hope that more authorities will take their lead and co-operate to meet their housing needs.

In conclusion, we are taking action on all fronts to get Britain building as never before, with a focus on social housing, action that has been welcomed by the sector and is delivering real results, more families in safe secure homes of their own, and more people who can put down roots and build stronger communities. I know that that is what the hon. Lady wants to see. It is also what I want to see, and I am pleased to say that we are on our way to delivering it.

Question put and agreed to.

9.5 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Thursday 7 December 2017

The House met at half-past Nine o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Leaving the EU: Animal Welfare

1. Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): What plans he has to improve animal welfare standards after the UK leaves the EU.

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman is right: there is confusion and uncertainty in the minds of some consumers as a result of current labelling. Already, farmer-led schemes such as the Red Tractor scheme ensure that people know that animals have been kept to the highest welfare standards, but we can go further and I look forward to working with the hon. Gentleman on that.

2. Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): On animal welfare standards, whether we are in the EU or outside it, will the Secretary of State consider the importance of labelling so that people know what they are buying? When a label says that a chicken has been reared outside or been stunned or not stunned, people must be able to trust that they know what has happened.

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend has been a passionate and successful campaigner for animal welfare during his entire career in the House of Commons, and he is right to say that there are now opportunities to take steps to improve the treatment of live exports—or potentially to ban them—as we leave the European Union. The steps that we take when we put animal welfare at the heart of all we do must be consistent with our broader negotiating objectives as we leave the EU.

Henry Smith: The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove) has done more for animal welfare in recent months than was achieved in many years previously, and we all owe him a debt of gratitude for that. Will he assure the House that as we leave the EU it is vital that we maintain our strong welfare laws as we leave, including in areas such as the Red Tractor scheme ensure that we can go even further.

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a very acute point. It is in the nature of single market rules and the European Union that some animal husbandry practices, which we would not tolerate in this country, apply to things that we sometimes import. We must consider how we can improve animal welfare standards all round.

Vernon Coaker: The hon. Gentleman is right: there is confusion and uncertainty in the minds of some consumers as a result of current labelling. Already, farmer-led schemes such as the Red Tractor scheme ensure that people know that animals have been kept to the highest welfare standards, but we can go further and I look forward to working with the hon. Gentleman on that.

3. Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): As we prepare to leave the EU it is vital that we maintain our strong standards of animal welfare law and use Brexit to enhance them, not diminish them by reverting to the lower standards permitted by EU law. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that the Government will seek to enhance our welfare laws as we leave, including in areas where single market rules currently block us from doing so?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend has been a passionate and successful campaigner for animal welfare during his entire career in the House of Commons, and he is right to say that there are now opportunities to take steps to improve the treatment of live exports—or potentially to ban them—as we leave the European Union. The steps that we take when we put animal welfare at the heart of all we do must be consistent with our broader negotiating objectives as we leave the EU.

4. Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I very much welcome higher welfare standards, cameras in slaughterhouses, and tougher sentencing, but as we enhance our welfare, we will also add cost to production. We want to ensure that our consumers eat high-quality food with high welfare standards, and that we do not import inferior quality meat with lower welfare standards.

Michael Gove: The Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee makes an excellent point—I know that the Committee is currently conducting an inquiry into the impact of leaving the European Union on food standards overall. Critical to high food standards is the viability and improved productivity of our farmers who do such a wonderful job.

5. Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Northern Ireland Assembly has passed more stringent legislation on animal cruelty than the UK mainland. What discussions has the Secretary of State’s Department had with the Northern Ireland Assembly about bringing similar measures into operation in England and Wales?

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman is right: there is confusion and uncertainty in the minds of some consumers as a result of current labelling. Already, farmer-led schemes such as the Red Tractor scheme ensure that people know that animals have been kept to the highest welfare standards, but we can go further and I look forward to working with the hon. Gentleman on that.
Michael Gove: As the hon. Gentleman knows, there are many ways in which Northern Ireland sets higher standards than we do in the rest of the UK, and I have always taken the view that we can learn a great deal from every part of the United Kingdom, not least the cherished Province which I love so much.

Future Trade Agreements: Agriculture

2. John Howell (Henley) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for International Trade on promoting UK agriculture in negotiations on future trade agreements.

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend, who did an outstanding job as trade envoy to Nigeria, I recently hosted a visit of the Nigerian Agriculture Minister to the UK. Does the Secretary of State accept that the UK is leading in innovation and education in agriculture, and that we have to offer to that country?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend has done an outstanding job as trade envoy to one of the fastest growing economies in the world, and there is much that we can do together to improve the transfer of technology between our two countries. Nigeria offers huge opportunities to our exporters, which I know my hon. Friend has done much to help to advance.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Surely the Secretary of State realises that the food and farming sector is terrified about the impact of leaving the European Union? Does he agree that the fact there has been no impact assessment by him or his Department on what will happen to farming in this country is a disgrace?

Michael Gove: No.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): Will the Secretary of State impress on the International Trade Secretary the fact that it is not just about goods, but about services? Will he join me in congratulating the British Horse Society on its 70th anniversary year and on being invited to provide an accreditation system for riding centres in China?

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend, who did an outstanding job when she was Secretary of State, is absolutely right. No country in the world has a finer equestrian tradition than our own. We can build on that tradition to ensure that services are provided to international markets.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Is there anyone, other than the Secretary of State and the Legatum Institute, who thinks that a free trade deal with Trump’s America would be good for British farming and the UK food chain?

Michael Gove: Yes.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): As everyone in this House will know—as a fellow Scot, the Secretary of State will know it very clearly—Scotland has some of the largest protected food names in the EU, with high-value products such as Scotch beef and Scotch salmon accounting for some £700 million in sales, yet there has been absolutely nothing from the Government on whether that will continue post Brexit. Will he give a clear indication and a clear commitment today that our participation in this vital scheme will continue or be replaced within the UK?

Michael Gove: I thank the hon. Gentleman, who has in his role been a passionate and effective advocate for Scottish industry. Yes, we want to make sure that geographical indicators and schemes that ensure high-quality foods from all parts of the United Kingdom are recognised within Europe and across the world. We want to ensure that appropriate schemes exist in the future so that we can provide recognition to our trading partners, as well as ensuring that the markets we care so much about are protected.

Pulse Fishing

3. Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to tackle pulse fishing in EU waters.

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): There are some concerns about the impact of pulse trawling on certain species of fish, in particular gadoids such as cod. Earlier this year, I asked the Centre for Environment Fisheries and Aquaculture Science to review the science on pulse trawling. The preliminary advice concludes that while the impact on the seabed is typically smaller than for traditional beam trawling, there are some detrimental effects on fish species such as cod. Once CEFAS has completed its work, we will decide what steps are required next.

Mr Bradshaw: I am grateful to the Minister for that reply. He will be aware, I am sure, of the concerns of fishers in parts of south-east England about the impact of Dutch electric pulse fishing on the stocks that, surprise surprise, move across national boundaries and are consequently shared. At the moment, we have a voice at the table and we can influence, alongside other more conservation-minded northern European countries, policies such as that on electric pulse fishing. How will we exert the same influence if we leave the European Union?

George Eustice: The right hon. Gentleman is right that pulse trawling is predominantly carried out by about 84 Dutch vessels, which mostly fish in UK waters to catch those species. Once we leave the European Union, we will decide the terms of access. That will give us the clarity and the ability to be able to ban certain approaches if we want to.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): The European Union is currently proposing draconian measures for our recreational sea anglers. They will stop recreational fishing for half the year. These ridiculous proposals should be resisted. I seek assurances from the Minister that he will stand up for our recreational sea anglers.
**George Eustice**: The situation with bass is precarious, which is why I and the UK Government pressed for emergency measures three years ago. However, we believe it is important that the current International Council for the Exploration of the Sea advice is benchmarked to take account of measures that have already been brought in. We will be arguing for a more proportionate package this December.

**Leaving the EU: Food Prices**

4. **Gill Furniss** (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect on food prices of the UK leaving the EU. [902793]

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): The key drivers of food price changes are exchange rates, weather events and oil prices. These factors affect all countries in the world, whether they are members of the European Union or independent nation states. We therefore assess the impact of leaving the EU on retail food prices to be marginal.

**Gill Furniss**: During the EU referendum campaign, the Secretary of State claimed that food prices would fall after a vote for Brexit, yet new data from the Office for National Statistics shows that food prices last month were up by 4.2% on 12 months earlier. My constituents will be feeling the pinch of those increases this Christmas. Will the Minister confirm that an analysis of food prices has been conducted, and that it is not just in his imagination? If he has published that analysis, when will it be in the public domain?

**George Eustice**: In the 18 months leading up to the referendum food prices fell by 7%, and in the 18 months since they have risen by 4%. Changes in food prices of plus or minus 5% are fairly typical. The fact is that whether a country is inside or outside the EU, the key drivers of food prices—weather events, exchange rates and oil prices—remain the same.

**Jo Churchill** (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): What discussions has the Minister held with the Department for International Trade about assessing the current EU non-tariff barriers on the pig products that are so important not only to my constituency, but to the broader constituency area of Suffolk?

**George Eustice**: I am aware that the pig industry is very important to my hon. Friend’s constituency. The UK has a close relationship with Denmark. Danish Crown, including its subsidiary Tulip, is a major investor in the UK, and since the decision to leave the European Union it has increased its investment, with the recent acquisition of new businesses. We are having discussions, but we have a strong and vibrant pig sector.

5. **Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): What steps he is taking to ensure the availability of vets for abattoirs after the UK leaves the EU.

**George Eustice**: As the hon. Lady may know, I studied horticulture and worked in the horticultural industry for 10 years. As we design a new agriculture policy, there is a real opportunity to support innovation in all sectors, including horticulture.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What about the price of animals for live export? Is there any prospect of banning that grisly trade altogether?

**George Eustice**: As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State pointed out earlier, once we have left the European Union, banning the export of live animals will become a possibility, and we have a manifesto commitment to restrict and control it further.

**Sue Hayman** (Workington) (Lab): The UK now has the second highest rate of food insecurity in Europe. In October, food and drink prices increased faster than at any other point over the last four years, and the latest Trussell Trust figures show a 13% increase on last year in the number of emergency food parcels issued. How will the Secretary of State and the Minister address the shameful increase in hunger and food poverty that is taking place throughout the country on this Government’s watch?

**George Eustice**: The key benchmark that Governments of all colours have studied for many years is the Living Costs and Food Survey. We know that over the last 15 to 20 years, the spending of the poorest 20% of households on food has remained constant at about 16.5%.

**Sue Hayman**: With all due respect, I do not think that that really answered my question. Yesterday the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union admitted that Ministers had carried out no proper assessment of the impact of Brexit on any UK economic sector. Food prices are rising. What assessment has DEFRA made of the impact of Brexit on those prices?

**George Eustice**: As I have said, we are carrying out this work, but our current assessment is that the impact is marginal. Economists sometimes make the mistake of not taking account of the fact that we have tariff rate quotas—that means that we already have a high degree of tariff-free trade—and the fact that the commodity price represents only a small part of the overall value of the shopping basket.

**Abattoirs**

5. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): The Minister said that Brexit would not have much impact on prices. I suggest that he speak to his former Conservative colleague Laura Sandys, the head of the Food Foundation, which has said that Brexit could mean an increase of £158 a year in what the average family spends on fruit and veg. Will he ensure that the horticultural sector, which has been much neglected by successive Governments, is given the priority that it deserves in the agriculture Bill?

**George Eustice**: The situation with bass is precarious, which is why I and the UK Government pressed for emergency measures three years ago. However, we believe it is important that the current International Council for the Exploration of the Sea advice is benchmarked to take account of measures that have already been brought in. We will be arguing for a more proportionate package this December.

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Tim Farron: I appreciate the Secretary of State’s reply. Britain leads the world in both food hygiene and animal welfare, but that is now at risk. The British Veterinary Association reckons that 95% of the vets in our abattoirs are from the EU, and that many of them are leaving. Will the Secretary of State release the impact assessment that I am certain he will have carried out, and will he tell us what action he is taking to protect our meat industry, animal welfare and food safety from that clear and imminent threat?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising this issue. He is right: more than 90% of the veterinarians in our abattoirs come from the EU27 countries, and I and my Department have been talking to representatives of the profession to ensure that those who do such a wonderful job continue to feel valued and to play the important role they do in assuring the public of the very high standards of food hygiene.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Ind): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the slaughter of UK animals should take place in UK abattoirs overseen by appropriately qualified vets, and will he take steps to ensure that the evil and cruel trade of live animal exports is ended when we leave the EU?

Michael Gove: I commend my hon. Friend for his campaigning on this issue, and, as he points out, as we leave the EU there are opportunities to review and change our approach to live exports, and to ensure higher standards of animal welfare.

Leaving the EU: Farming

6. Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): What steps he is taking to maintain the economic viability of farming after the UK has left the EU.

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): The common agricultural policy has been a bureaucratic quagmire that has undermined British agriculture and failed our environment. Leaving the EU allows us to bring clarity and purpose to agriculture policy in the UK for the first time for 45 years. We are committed to introducing an agriculture Bill in this Session and will outline further plans next year.

Alex Burghart: I am grateful to the Minister for his remarks. Many farmers in my constituency in the bounteous county of Essex supported Brexit, but some did not. What reassurances can he give them that the Government are straining their many sinews to ensure that new and emerging food markets are open to them after Brexit?

George Eustice: We will be working with colleagues in the Department for International Trade to open up new markets. There are opportunities, particularly in sectors such as dairy. We have also been very clear that we will maintain the agriculture budget for this Parliament—that is a manifesto commitment—and that we will have a smooth transition from the policy we have now to the new policy.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Has the Minister seen Wednesday’s press release from the Farmers Union of Wales, which said: “Denying Wales access to the Single Market and Customs Union would have catastrophic consequences on farming in Wales? Would he care to comment?

George Eustice: I very regularly meet members of the FUW, and we absolutely recognise the importance of tariff-free trade with the EU. That is why this Government’s clear position is that we want a comprehensive and ambitious free trade agreement.

EU Convergence Uplift Funding

7. Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the (a) Scottish Government and (b) National Farmers Union of Scotland on EU convergence uplift funding.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): I met the Scottish Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Connectivity, Fergus Ewing, on 6 November, when we discussed EU convergence uplift funding, and I most recently met the National Farmers Union of Scotland on 31 October, when that funding was one of a number of issues discussed. I look forward to seeing the Scottish Cabinet Secretary next Thursday, and also, thanks to the intercession of my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Colin Clark), to meeting representatives of the NFU of Scotland on that day as well.

Martyn Day: Back in September, key farming organisations, including the NFUS, wrote to the Minister on convergence uplift. I have been told that the Government have not yet responded. Why have they not responded, and will the Minister fix the scandal now by committing to give Scottish farmers the £160 million they are rightfully due?

Michael Gove: I absolutely recognise, and indeed have explained to the hon. Gentleman’s Scottish National party colleague, that the issue of convergence uplifting is ripe for reassessment. I have discussed the issue not just with the Scottish Cabinet Secretary, but with farming union representatives, and I know it will be raised when we meet next week.

Flood Defences

8. Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the resilience of flood defences in Cumbria.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): The resilience of flood defences is good. In October, the Environment Agency’s assessment showed that over 95% of the flood defence assets it maintains in the highest risk areas were at, or above, the target condition, and in Cumbria the proportion was 97.5%. We have repaired all the flood defences damaged in the winter of 2015. We know there is more to do to help communities in Keswick as well as...
other parts of Copeland and across Cumbria. That is why we allocated £58 million extra for flood risk management schemes.

**Trudy Harrison:** I am grateful for that response. However, £800,000 was pledged for my community in Braithwaite, which was devastated in Storm Desmond. Two years on, can the Minister please confirm when the work will be completed for that village?

**Dr Coffey:** My hon. Friend is right to raise the issue of that particular village. I am aware that the shortlisting of options is due to be completed next month, with a target date of the end of 2019. I will be meeting her and her colleagues from Cumbria next week to discuss the details further.

**Julian Sturdy:** Hard flood defences such as the Foss barrier and whole catchment management solutions are vital for cities such as York, but it is essential that those strategies equally protect smaller communities. Can the Minister assure me that communities south of York will not be forgotten as we progress and continue to develop flood management schemes?

**Dr Coffey:** I can certainly give my hon. Friend that assurance. The York long-term plan will use a whole catchment approach to flood risk management. It includes upper catchment management changes, which will be a key component in reducing risk to York and other communities downstream, including the ones to which he refers. I can assure him that the modelling by the Environment Agency ensures that hard flood defences in York will not impact on the communities he has mentioned.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is two years since the devastating floods hit York, yet last week the residents of Clementhorpe learned that their barriers were going to be further delayed and that they will not have protection until at least 2019. What will the Minister do to ensure not only that that programme is speeded up, but that the residents of York are protected in the intervening period?

**Dr Coffey:** Since the floods of December 2015, when about 600 properties were flooded, we have invested £17 million to upgrade the Foss barrier. That includes eight high-volume pumps to provide an even greater standard of protection than before, and we have developed a five-year plan to invest £45 million in new defences that will better protect 2,000 properties.

**Holly Lynch** (Halifax) (Lab): Following Storm Desmond and Storm Eva in 2015, the Government made welcome direct payments for resilience work to residents who had been devastated by the flooding. Following the floods in Galgate last month, however, the Government told Lancaster City Council that that flooding was not severe enough to warrant the same assistance, despite 143 homes being vacated because of flood damage. Will the Minister make representations to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government and urge him to allocate money to fund essential flood resilience work in flood-affected communities like Galgate, right across the country?

**Dr Coffey:** As I have indicated, the overall level of flood defence resilience is good, including in Lancashire. I am very concerned about the people who suffered that shock flooding the other week, and I will of course meet the affected MPs. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris) is seeing me next week to discuss this very matter.

**Leaving the EU: Departmental Preparation**

9. **Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to prepare for the UK’s departure from the EU.

**The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs** (Michael Gove): My right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) put in place a major programme of work to prepare for the UK’s departure from the European Union, planning for a number of scenarios, and we in DEFRA keep the effectiveness of that work under continual review. It is led by outstanding civil servants, to whom I wish to pay tribute now.

**Sir Edward Leigh:** We know that, in several areas, EU rules have prevented us from improving standards of animal welfare. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that he is now doing the detailed preparation so that on day one of our freedom, he will be ready to take action, including to ban the trade in the export of live animals?

**Michael Gove:** My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. That work is being undertaken now, not just in the area to which he rightly alludes but in other areas of animal welfare.

**Mary Creagh** (Wakefield) (Lab): By next summer, the UK chemical industry will have spent £250 million registering its chemicals. It is united in wanting to remain within the registration, evaluation, authorisation and restriction of chemicals—REACH—scheme and to avoid EU tariffs of between 4% and 6% on its goods, so why is the Secretary of State proposing to double its regulatory burden by setting up a new agency here? Why is he playing politics with our second largest manufacturing sector?

**Michael Gove:** The hon. Lady has been a consistent champion of the work that is done in our world-leading chemicals industry. We are seeking to find the right regulatory framework to ensure that we can continue to do good work.

**Mr Speaker:** I think that the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies) is now conscious. He has a question on the Order Paper that is not entirely unadjacent to the subject of which we are now treating.

11. **David T. C. Davies** (Monmouth) (Con): On this very point, Sir, does my right hon. Friend agree that we absolutely have to continue our support for glyphosate, which protects the environment by reducing the need for excess tillage and to use other herbicides? With he continue to support this safe herbicide once Brexit has taken place?

**Mr Speaker:** Well done!
Michael Gove: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point. I am delighted that Phil Hogan, the outstanding Commissioner for Agriculture, has secured assent for the reauthorisation of glyphosate for five more years. It is, as my hon. Friend makes clear, a valuable tool for ensuring that we can move towards no till or min till agriculture, which in itself is an environmental gain.

Mr Speaker: The Secretary of State clearly knows all this jargon very well. Listening to him this morning is quite an educational experience.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): My colleagues and I are working hard to try to get the Northern Ireland Executive restored, but in the absence of an Executive will the Secretary of State ensure that he has discussions with the permanent secretary at the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in Northern Ireland to ensure that our sector and its niche markets are protected beyond March 2019?

Michael Gove: Absolutely. I am looking forward to representatives from DAERA coming to DEFRA next Thursday for the latest in our series of talks. I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman and his Democratic Unionist party colleagues, who ensure that my ministerial colleagues and I are kept up to the mark with the policies that need to be shaped in the interests of Northern Ireland’s farmers and fishermen, who do so much to ensure that there is healthy food on all our plates.

Food and Drink Sector: Industrial Strategy

10. David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): What steps he is taking to support the food and drink sector in line with the industrial strategy. [902799]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): I am delighted that the industrial strategy White Paper, which sets out plans to boost productivity and earnings across the UK, recognises the importance of the food and drink sector, which is why we have announced a new food and drink sector council as part of the strategy.

David Duguid: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. He will be more aware than most that, owing to the quality of the product, the seafood processing industry in my constituency is less concerned about access to markets after we leave the EU than it is about access to labour. What discussions has he had with representatives of the Scottish seafood processing industry or, indeed, the Home Office to address such concerns?

Michael Gove: There is no better champion of the Scottish fish processing industry than my hon. Friend, and it was thanks to his work that I was able to attend a roundtable in Aberdeen a couple of months ago, at which fish processors were able to put to me their specific demands. Since then, I have talked to the Home Secretary and the Immigration Minister about precisely those issues. I must say that were it not for my hon. Friend, that argument would not be happening at the heart of Government and it would not be being heard and acted upon. He is a brilliant advocate, and the people of Peterhead, Fraserburgh, Mintlaw, Turriff and the other communities in his constituency are exceptionally lucky to have him.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer) has just waved at the Chair, which may be analogous to, although not quite the same as, the conventional method of bobbing, but I am going to deduce that the hon. Gentleman is interested in contributing to our proceedings.

16. [902807] Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker; I am on a learning curve here. My constituency features a small bespoke brewery called Phipps, which is right next to the giant Carlsberg plant. Such a juxtaposition illustrates the vast range in brewing, and in the food and drink sector more widely, so will producers of all sizes be catered for within a sector deal in the industrial strategy?

Michael Gove: Absolutely. We all know that Carlsberg is primarily a brewer, but if Carlsberg did MPs, my hon. Friend would be the premium brand—fizzy with a great head and always a pleasure to spend time with at an evening. He is absolutely right that we need to ensure not only that major brewers can invest in this country, but that premium artisanal brewers have their interests represented, and that is what the industrial strategy will do.

Mr Speaker: All that remains is for the Secretary of State to congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his characteristic acuity, which I know is a preferred phrase of the right hon. Gentleman. No doubt it will be in evidence at the next oral questions—we very much hope so.

Leaving the EU: Environmental Law

13. Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure the full transfer of EU environmental law to the UK after the UK leaves the EU. [902803]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): The European Union (Withdrawal) Bill will ensure that the whole body of existing EU environmental law continues to have effect in UK law. Last month, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced that we will consult on the creation of a new national policy statement on environmental principles and on a new independent and statutory body to hold the Government and, potentially, public authorities to account on their environmental commitments.

Marsha De Cordova: I thank the Minister for her response. The Government have boasted that they will leave the environment in a better state than they found it in, so does the Minister agree that we need to harness in law not only equivalent, but even better levels of environmental protections after we leave the EU?

Dr Coffey: I agree with the hon. Lady. We are absolutely committed to that, and it has been in our manifesto for the past two years. Aspects of the environment are
improving, and with our 25-year environment plan, which will be published shortly, we will continue to set out that agenda for the next generation.

**Leaving the EU: Puppy Welfare**

14. **Angela Smith** (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): What plans has he to ensure the welfare of puppies traded between the UK and EU countries after the UK leaves the EU?

**The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove):** We are actively looking to see what we can do in this area. Leaving the European Union provides us with new opportunities to deal with the illegal trade in puppies.

**Angela Smith:** Will the Secretary of State confirm that, once the EU pet travel rules have been transferred to the UK statute book, the scheme will be reviewed as a priority, taking into account the recommendations of the Dogs Trust? As he well knows, the trust has campaigned tirelessly for a number of years to change and improve the scheme.

**Michael Gove:** It is not just the Dogs Trust that has campaigned; the hon. Lady has campaigned, too. She and the Dogs Trust are right that we need to look at the law. We hope to make announcements even before we leave the European Union about how the law can be improved.

I place on record my thanks to the Dogs Trust because, of the two dogs in the Gove family home, one is a rescue dog that the trust was responsible for finding.

**Topical Questions**

**T1. [902820] Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab):** If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove):** We discussed the vital importance of the veterinary profession during our earlier exchanges on the question from the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron). I thank the nation’s chief veterinary officer, Nigel Gibbens, for his years of service as he moves on and leaves the Department. He has done an outstanding job, and the country is grateful for his service.

**Ruth Cadbury:** The UK’s terrible air pollution is getting worse and does not respect local authority boundaries. When can we expect an air quality plan that makes a real difference, or will the Secretary of State continue to shunt responsibility to councils that have neither the resources nor the powers to address this nationwide challenge?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey):** Air quality is actually improving. I recognise the challenges on roadside NOx, but hopefully the hon. Lady is aware of the £90,000 grant given directly to Ealing Council to help to address particulates. We are preparing a wider clean air strategy, with a consultation next year.

**T2. [902821] Rachel Maclean** (Redditch) (Con): I, along with many colleagues, have been contacted by constituents with concerns about the vote against new clause 30 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, which was interpreted as an attempt to weaken the protection of animals. The Secretary of State and the Government have been very clear that we are committed to the highest standards of animal welfare, but will my right hon. Friend please provide absolute assurances that that will be the case as we leave the EU?

**Michael Gove:** My hon. Friend has been a clear and consistent advocate for higher standards of animal welfare, both before and since she entered this House. It is absolutely the case that we are committed to ensuring not just that we recognise the principle of animal sentience, but that we provide appropriate and stronger protection in UK law. We will shortly be bringing forward proposals on the appropriate legislative vehicle for that protection.

**T3. [902822] Dan Jarvis** (Barnsley Central) (Lab): It was good to see the Secretary of State supporting the Woodland Trust event in Parliament yesterday. What work is he doing with the Department for Communities and Local Government to strengthen protection for ancient woodland in the national planning policy framework?

**Michael Gove:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his work in this area. He has also been a great champion of the Woodland Trust’s work. I met the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government yesterday to discuss precisely this issue, and I hope that we can bring forward proposals when the 25-year environment plan is published next year.

**T4. [902823] Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): A quarter of our rivers are at risk from unsustainable abstraction, which is a particular problem in the south and east. When will the Government actually take action to tackle unsustainable water abstraction?

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** We have been considering this carefully. I hope that we will be able to make an announcement on the publication of our abstraction plan within the next month. I am sure the hon. Gentleman will enjoy reading it, and I am happy to discuss it with him later.
Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Cornish food and drink is some of the best in the world, whether it is our amazing dairy products, such as Rodda’s cream, which is made in the constituency of the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, or Tribute beer, which is brewed by St Austell. What conversations is the Secretary of State having with the Secretary of State for International Trade about the possible new markets for Cornish food and drink once we leave the EU?

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): I thank my hon. Friend for mentioning Rodda’s, which is obviously a world-leading food company. It has been very successful in exporting its cream to the far east and other markets. We are in regular discussions with the Department for International Trade and, as I said earlier, there are export opportunities for our great food producers.

T5. [902824] Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): At DEFRA questions on 20 July, the Secretary of State was asked to confirm that article 13 of the Lisbon treaty, which, as we have heard, categories animals as sentient beings, would be part of the repeal Bill. He replied: “Absolutely”. Given that he then voted against the inclusion of article 13, what caused him to disagree with himself?

Michael Gove: I am tempted to quote from the American poet, whose name I temporarily forget, who made the point that “I contain multitudes”. The truth is that we want to go further than existing EU law to protect animal welfare. A better legislative vehicle is available, and we will make an announcement about that next week.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Cats Protection has highlighted the fact that when the UK signed up to the EU pet travel scheme, we had to abandon the previous requirements that cats coming into the UK needed compulsory treatment against tapeworm and ticks. When we leave the EU, may we reinstate these regulations?

Michael Gove: I have two things to say. The first is that the poet whose name I temporarily forgot is, of course, Walt Whitman. The second is that the short answer to my hon. Friend’s question is yes.

T6. [902825] Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give an assurance that following our withdrawal from the EU, farmers in my constituency will have a clear and accessible route to apply for stewardship and environmental schemes, because at the moment the process is arduous and complex?

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady makes a good point. Only last week we announced that we would be simplifying countryside stewardship and having four principal routes that farmers can take. I look forward to working with her to ensure that the farmers she represents have access to this money, which will ensure that her beautiful constituency receives the cash it needs for further environmental enhancement.

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): There was huge applause for the Government’s decision to ban the UK ivory trade, but there is now growing evidence of an increase in the trade in hippo ivory. With only 100,000 or so African hippos left, the slightest increase in demand could spell disaster for that species. May I urge Ministers to extend the proposed ban to include other ivory-bearing species such as hippo, narwhal, walrus and the like?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: My hon. Friend makes a good point. The scope of our proposed legislation is so far restricted to African and Asian elephants, but the consultation is still open, so I will take what he says as a submission. We are very keen to see what we can do to protect all endangered species and their habitats, and this may be one way of achieving that.

T8. [902827] Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): About half of the veterinary surgeons registering in the UK qualified elsewhere in the EU. Will the Secretary of State tell the House what discussions he is having with Cabinet colleagues to ensure that their vital skills continue to receive due recognition post Brexit? Will veterinary professionals be able to come to the UK and work on exactly the same terms as they currently enjoy?

George Eustice: Such discussions are part of our planning. We want to put in place a close new partnership with our European partners, and trying to get an agreement on mutual recognition of some of these qualifications would be on that agenda.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): When we leave the EU, the UK will be able to set its own farm support policy. What assessment has the Secretary of State made of whether, if the EU continues farm support, the UK will have to do so, because otherwise British farming could be severely disadvantaged?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is one of the most formidable and knowledgeable experts on the agri-food business in this House, and he is absolutely right to say that we need to keep pace with what is happening in other markets to ensure that we support farmers to continue the work that they do. It is thanks to his advocacy that National Farmers Union of Scotland representatives will be coming into DEFRA next Thursday, when I look forward to discussing how we can ensure that they and their colleagues get the support they deserve in the future.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Marriage Certificates: Equal Registration

1. Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): What recent discussions the Church of England has had with the Government on enabling mothers to be registered on an equal basis with fathers on marriage certificates.

2. Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): What recent discussions the Church of England has had with the Government on enabling mothers to be registered on an equal basis with fathers on marriage certificates.
6. Tim Loughton: (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): What recent discussions the Church of England has had with the Government on enabling mothers to be registered on an equal basis with fathers on marriage certificates.

Dame Caroline Spelman, Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): I have had many recent discussions with Departments, particularly the Home Office, not least because of my Registration of Marriage (No. 2) Bill, which is in train. There is an identical Bill before the House of Lords that would achieve the same purpose of allowing mothers to sign marriage certificates. I am not precious about which Bill gets to the finishing line first—we just need to do it.

Gillian Keegan: Is the Church of England making representations to our colleagues in government about their previous commitment to use Government time to get one of the Bills passed?

Dame Caroline Spelman: Yes. Many Members on both sides of the House have sought to achieve that end. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar) for promoting an identical Bill, as well as the hon. Member for Neath (Christina Rees)—I want to emphasise that this is a cross-party issue—who presented a previous Bill. I received a letter from the Prime Minister in April in response to one that I sent. She absolutely acknowledges the commitment made in 2014 by her predecessor to achieve this, and recognises the need for primary legislation to make sure that the details of both parents can be on the certificate.

Wendy Morton: The signing of the register is a really valued part of the marriage service in churches right across the country. Will my right hon. Friend reassure me that that will remain unchanged?

Dame Caroline Spelman: Yes. I reassure my hon. Friend that the registers will remain in the vestry for that all-important photo. Under the proposed new system, on which the Church has consulted, vicars will download a marriage certificate, which will be signed by the couple, as is currently the case, and the vicar will complete the form by filling in the parents’ names, which explicitly gives the possibility of mothers being on the certificate in the future.

Tim Loughton: I am grateful for my right hon. Friend’s comprehensive answer, which leaves me little more to add, other than to ask whether she and the Church of England will support my Civil Partnerships, Marriages and Deaths (Registration Etc.) Bill, which is due for Second Reading on 2 February 2018 and includes those exact requirements. Will the Church of England also agree to back equal civil partnerships, through their extension to opposite-sex partnerships, as set out by the Bill?

Dame Caroline Spelman: The Church has no fixed view on equal civil partnerships but, in general, if they are for stable, committed and long-lasting relationships, they are likely to be beneficial, especially when children are involved. Personally, I support that, and for that reason I have rolled my Bill beyond the date for the consideration of my hon. Friend’s Bill to give him an opportunity to make progress.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I have three daughters with children. They and many of my constituents want me to ask why this simple step forward for equality has taken so long.

Dame Caroline Spelman: I ask myself the very same question. There have been several attempts and undertakings, including by the previous Labour Government in 2002. I urge colleagues on both sides of the House to do everything they can to make sure that we achieve this change in the law and give fair wind to the Registration of Marriage (No. 2) Bill.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): It is good to hear what the right hon. Lady has to say. Will she also talk to the Church about making it easier for people to get married in church and, indeed, to have their children baptised? That would be real equality.

Dame Caroline Spelman: When answering that question on previous occasions, I have given examples of how churches reach out to the surrounding community so that the thought of getting married is not intimidating. It does not need to be expensive, either—getting married in church is probably the least part of what it actually costs to put on a wedding. I can point the hon. Gentleman towards our materials to encourage people to get married in church.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Given that 25% of households are single-parent households, and that 90% of those are mother-led households, does the right hon. Lady agree that the marriage certificate must take into account that large section of people who are overlooked, yet in real life watch over everything in the home?

Dame Caroline Spelman: The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point, which really came out in the Westminster Hall debate that I secured. A number of hon. Members who are themselves the children of a single parent—in most cases, the mother—were really disappointed to find out at the moment they got married that their mum, who had done everything possible to bring them up, was not, under existing law, able to sign the certificate as the parent. That is a very strong reason why the situation needs to change.

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): My right hon. Friend’s commitment on this issue is well known, and it is clear that both sides of the House are very supportive of what she, I and others have tried to achieve. Following her answer to my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), can she reaffirm that the Church, as it set out to do when I brought forward my private Member’s Bill, remains supportive of what we are trying to achieve?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I would like to clear up any possible misunderstanding that the Church is in any way against making this change; the reverse is true. The Church has consulted on changing the marriage registration process. It will save money through the practical reality of moving to an electronic register. The General Register
Office is in favour of making the change, and there is cross-party and institutional support—let us just get it done.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION

The hon. Member for Gainsborough, the Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission, was asked—

Police Force Financial Sustainability

3. Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): What the policy of the National Audit Office is on conducting regular reviews of the financial sustainability of police forces.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): The National Audit Office’s work programme is a matter for the Comptroller and Auditor General, not the Public Accounts Commission. The NAO does not audit individual police forces, but through its access to the Home Office it published the report “Financial sustainability of police forces in England and Wales” in June 2015.

Louise Haigh: I am grateful for that answer. An independent assessment of police force funding would be welcome, not just on an individual force level, but as a whole. The hon. Gentleman is right that the NAO published an effective report two years ago, but the Government have claimed since then that they have protected police funding, which has been challenged by police and crime commissioners and the UK Statistics Authority. An independent assessment would be welcome, so I ask the hon. Gentleman to make that request of the NAO.

Sir Edward Leigh: Of course I will pass that request to the Comptroller and Auditor General. The hon. Lady is right: although police forces have successfully reduced costs since 2011, the report that I mentioned has recommended that the Home Office works with other bodies to develop better information on the health of police services and early warnings of when a force might fail. Her question is apposite.

Audit Costs

4. Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): What comparative assessment he has made of the operating costs of the National Audit Office and auditing bodies in other countries.

Sir Edward Leigh: The NAO is continually looking at how it can save money. The most recent audited financial accounts show that the NAO has reduced its net resource costs by 21% in real terms against its 2010-11 baseline. That is even while taking on a much greater role in local government at the request of Parliament.

Nigel Mills: I am grateful for that answer. I have no doubt about the great work that the NAO does as our spending watchdog, but what more can my hon. Friend do to be assured that it is cost-effective itself?
our politics is viewed. I am glad that the Commission will look to publish diversity data on the journalists covering Parliament, but I encourage it to implement recommendation 4 of “The Good Parliament” review in full by publishing data not only on gender, but on other characteristics; by breaking down the data by media organisation; and by setting clear targets so that, by 2020, men and women each have no fewer than 40% of passes for the journalists’ Lobby on the estate.

Tom Brake: My hon. Friend may be aware that currently neither the Commons Reference Group on Representation and Inclusion, nor the Commission, has considered the recommendation of “The Good Parliament” report. However, following her question, I will certainly ensure that they do as soon as possible, and I will look specifically at ensuring that the extensive level of detail that she has requested is reflected in future reports.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I think that “The Good Parliament” report will come to be seen as a pivotal and seminal publication in the history of the reform and modernisation of this place. Will the right hon. Gentleman say a bit more about how its recommendations, including those relating to the Press Gallery, are being taken forward, and how the Commission is considering them in the light of other opportunities to renew and restore this place, including in the northern estate?

Tom Brake: One of the measures of the importance that is being placed on the report is the emphasis that Mr Speaker and the House of Commons Commission are putting on it. This is clearly something that Members of Parliament are actively tracking. I am therefore confident that both the Commons Reference Group and, indeed, the Commission, will want to ensure that due priority is given to the recommendations of “The Good Parliament” report, and that they are implemented as soon as possible.

**CHURCH COMMISSIONERS**

The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

**Egypt: Attacks on Religious Communities**

8. Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): What steps the Church of England is taking to support religious communities in Egypt as a result of the recent attacks against Coptic and Islamic communities in that country.

Vicky Ford: What steps is the Church taking to highlight the importance of a cross-Department approach to tackling the persecution of religious minorities, especially Christians abroad, not simply because that is the right thing to do, but because it is important for our security at home?

Dame Caroline Spelman: The Church regularly facilitates opportunities for Church representatives to speak to Government Departments. Only this week we facilitated a visit by a bishop from Zimbabwe, who spoke to Foreign Office Ministers. I draw my hon. Friend’s attention to the interesting speech made by the Bishop of Peterborough on 5 December, in which he talked very much about the hidden victims of persecution. I think that she will find comfort in the bishop’s speech with regard to awareness of how this plays at home.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the many displaced middle east Christians need support to ensure that they have safe environments in which to live and flourish? Hopefully, they will be able, in time, to return to their home communities. Will she join me in commending Open Doors for its global seven-year campaign, “Hope for the Middle East”?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I certainly commend Open Doors. I recommend to Members next Wednesday afternoon’s “Hope for the Middle East” event in the Terrace Pavilion, where Open Doors will be encouraging us all to support the plight of those people.

As that was probably the last question to me before the recess, may I wish everybody a happy Christmas? Let us not forget that Jesus was carried in his mother’s arms all the way to Egypt, fleeing persecution, so while we celebrate, let us also remember those who are forced to flee from persecution.

**ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE**

The hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South, representing the Speaker’s Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—

**EU Referendum: Electoral Commission Resources**

9. Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): What assessment has been made of the adequacy of resources available to the Electoral Commission to undertake multiple investigations into the EU referendum campaign.

Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South): The Electoral Commission has experience of undertaking multiple investigations and is confident that its resourcing for this year is sufficient. Nevertheless, it recognises that its workload in this area has increased. Early in 2018, the commission will be submitting its budget for the next financial year for scrutiny. It is for the Speaker’s Committee on the Electoral Commission to agree the estimate before its submission to Parliament.

Mr Bradshaw: I hope that the Speaker’s Committee will ensure that the Electoral Commission has all the resources it needs to do this important work. As well as investigating Russian interference, which the Electoral Commission’s chairman, John Holmes, confirmed it was doing yesterday, will my hon. Friend comment on...
whether the commission is examining whether there was any collusion between Vote Leave, Leave.EU, Labour Leave, BeLeave, the Democratic Unionist party and Veterans for Britain? Will she also comment on whether the role of the United States hedge fund billionaire, Robert Mercer, is being investigated?

Bridget Phillipson: I know that the commission has had useful and positive engagement with my right hon. Friend about these matters. Various investigations are under way, so it will not be possible to comment further, but I can assure him that once any investigations are complete, the commission will decide whether any breaches have occurred and, if so, what further action may be appropriate. The outcome of all investigations will be publicised on the Electoral Commission website in due course.

Mr Speaker: Order. We now come to the urgent question—

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: Is the hon. Lady seeking to come in on this question a bit belatedly?

Vicky Ford indicated assent.

Mr Speaker: I think the hon. Lady has already asked a question in this group, so I am afraid it is not within the rules for her to come in, but I am sure we will hear further from her in the course of the day—possibly on multiple occasions. We will see.
Israel: US Embassy

10.30 am

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the implications of President Trump’s decision to move the United States embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and to recognise Jerusalem as Israel’s capital.

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): I thank the right hon. Lady for an important and urgent question.

As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made clear in her statement yesterday, “We disagree with the US decision to move its embassy to Jerusalem and recognise Jerusalem as the Israeli capital before a final status agreement. We believe it is unhelpful in terms of prospects for peace in the region. The British Embassy to Israel is based in Tel Aviv and we have no plans to move it.”

Our position on the status of Jerusalem is clear and long-standing: it should be determined in a negotiated settlement between the Israelis and the Palestinians, and Jerusalem should ultimately be the shared capital of the Israeli and Palestinian states. In line with relevant Security Council Resolutions, we regard East Jerusalem as part of the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

We share President Trump’s desire to bring an end to this conflict. We welcome his commitment in his statement “to a two-state solution negotiated between the parties, and note the importance of his clear acknowledgement that the final status of Jerusalem, including the sovereign boundaries within the city, must be subject to negotiations between the Israelis and the Palestinians.”

We encourage the US Administration to now bring forward detailed proposals for an Israel-Palestinian settlement.

To have the best chances of success, the peace process must be conducted in an atmosphere free from violence. We call on all parties to work together to maintain calm at a crucial time.

Emily Thornberry: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question, and I welcome the opening remarks from the Minister of State.

For all of us in this House and beyond who have worked tirelessly for decades in the hope of lasting peace in the middle east, yesterday’s decision was an absolute hammer blow to those hopes. There is a reason why, before yesterday, no other country would locate its embassy in Jerusalem and no other major country would recognise Jerusalem as Israel’s capital: because to do either thing, let alone both at the same time, confers legitimacy on Israel’s occupation of East Jerusalem—an occupation with no basis in international law, and a permanent barrier to achieving the political settlement that we all wish for.

The sheer recklessness of that decision needs no debate. Donald Trump is not crying “Fire!” in a crowded theatre; he is deliberately setting fire to the theatre. And then he has the unbelievable cheek to claim that he is doing this to move forward the peace process, when in reality he is setting it back decades.

As usual—as with the Muslim ban, the Paris agreement and the Iran deal—the question for the UK Government is twofold. First, what are they going to do about this mess? With Donald Trump wilfully deserting America’s role as peace broker between Israel and Palestine, how will we work with our other allies to fill that void?

Secondly, when will the Government admit that they have got their strategy with Donald Trump totally wrong? They told us that holding his hand, hugging him close and indulging him with the offer of a state visit was the best way of wielding influence and shaping his policies. But on Jerusalem, as on so many issues before, they have been made to look like fools: weak, ignored and entirely without influence. When will they realise that bending over for a bully only encourages their behaviour? What our country needs, and what the world needs, is a British Government prepared to stand up to him.

Alistair Burt: I thank the right hon. Lady for her comments. I agree that a difficult consensus has been broken. She is right that the international consensus around the status of Jerusalem has been one of the things we have all held on to during a period when the ultimate settlement—the final settlement—has yet to be agreed. It has always been seen as part of the process that, at the end of that negotiated settlement, the status of Jerusalem would be confirmed. The United States has taken a decision about itself and about the location of its embassy. In answer to her final point about the United Kingdom’s position vis-à-vis President Trump and the United States, we make it clear that we disagree with the decision. The Prime Minister has said that it is unhelpful. It is not a decision we would take.

We have now to decide, as the right hon. Lady said, what we do now. The first thing we have done is to co-sponsor a meeting tomorrow at the UN Security Council when this will be discussed. We have co-sponsored that with our European partners because it provides the opportunity to take stock of where we are and how we can move forward. There are two options: one is that we just dwell on this particular decision of the United States, as people will for a while, and just leave it sitting there; and the other is to decide what we do now. It is imperative that we now see the work that the President’s envoys have been doing, which they have shared with a number of partners. That now needs to come forward—more quickly, perhaps, than people anticipated—and then we can see what there is to work on for friends both of Israel and of the Palestinians. The process has to move on. If the process were derailed by this, it would compound the unhelpfulness of the decision. That is what we want to talk about.

The right hon. Lady mentioned our longer-term relationship with the United States, which is very deep: defence, intelligence, security, trade—it covers a multitude of things. It has been in place for centuries and it will go on for centuries, regardless of leadership. We respect an elected President but we know that the relationship with the United States is much deeper, and the United Kingdom will continue to honour that relationship in its many forms.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): If the President has a cunning plan which he has not shared with any of his allies, may I invite my right hon. Friend to speculate on what it might be?

Alistair Burt: If there is, this is a decision that has clearly been welcomed by the Israeli Prime Minister and the state of Israel. There is no doubt that Israel sees...
the United States as a great friend. There is no surprise to any of us in relation to that, and nor does it change anything particularly markedly in terms of relationships in the region. Perhaps, when proposals come forward, if concessions are needed by the state of Israel in order to make the agreement that we all wish to see which will be supported by all sides, there just might now be an extra area of pressure that can be applied because a friend of Israel has done what the President has done.

I have no inkling of the thinking of the President of the United States. But, as everything in this whole business is used in one way or another, there are just possibly those within the state of Israel who will recognise the limb that the President has gone out on, and perhaps, when push comes to shove, that might be of some assistance. As for us, we are very clear on our position. We disagree with this and we will continue to work with all partners to seek the peace settlement that is so urgently needed.

**Chris Law** (Dundee West) (SNP): President Trump’s decision to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and to move the US embassy from Tel Aviv is not only reckless and wrong but throws the entire peace process into jeopardy. There is no denying that this decision seriously hinders a two-state solution to the conflict. The reaction from the international community has been overwhelming. Pope Francis said, “I cannot remain silent.” The UN Secretary-General spoke of his “great anxiety”. The European Union has expressed “serious concern”. I could go on.

Tomorrow, the UN will meet amid concerns that Mr Trump’s announcement is in breach of both international law and UN resolutions. Will the Minister therefore take a moment to condemn this reckless decision in the strongest possible terms and assure the House that all efforts will be made tomorrow at the UN meeting to have the decision reversed?

Regardless of political differences across this Chamber, we share the values of tolerance, inclusion and respect across these islands. Taking that into consideration, will the Minister today completely rule out a state visit from President Trump and send out a clear message that his divisive and reckless actions are not welcome here?

**Alistair Burt**: We will allow the peace process to be derailed by this only if we interpret the decision as doing just that, as opposed to providing a different opportunity to take the peace process forward. The envoys are still working; they are still in contact with Arab states and Arab partners, as well as the state of Israel. As I said, that work should continue with greater urgency. The risks in the region are even clearer this morning than they were yesterday before the President spoke—risks that many colleagues in this House know full well because of our frequent visits to the region. The only way that those risks can be quelled is by demonstrating to those who seek hope for the process that there is still a chance of hope. The United Kingdom must do nothing to cut off that possibility. That is why we have to keep urging the peace process forward. The deficit of trust with the United States because of its decision will be noted, but it will remain an important part of discussions for the future.

On the hon. Gentleman’s other two questions, we co-sponsored the meeting with the UN, so it is our intention to work with partners urgently on moving this forward. On the President’s visit, again, the Prime Minister has made clear her views on that: an invitation has been extended, but there is no date set for the visit.

**Dame Caroline Spelman** (Meriden) (Con): I welcome what the Minister of State has said this morning. I thought I would share with the House a sentence from a letter from the Patriarchs and Heads of Local Churches in Jerusalem to President Trump:

“peace...cannot be reached without Jerusalem being for all.”

That was echoed yesterday by the Archbishop of Canterbury, who said:

“The status quo of the City of Jerusalem is one of the few stable elements of hope for peace”.

He urged us all to

“Pray for the peace of Jerusalem”.

**Alistair Burt**: I think that we would all concur with those words. The status of Jerusalem is of immense importance in the region to all faiths and all parties who live there. It is essential that the consensus that Jerusalem is for all be honoured. As I stated, it is very clear that our position on the final status of Jerusalem, as part of the final settlement to be agreed between the parties, is the most important thing, not anyone’s unilateral decision about what they think about Jerusalem.

**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The UK Government have previously said that they would recognise Palestine when the time was right. Is the time not right now?

**Alistair Burt**: Our view has been that recognition of Palestine should come at the time when that is in the best interests of the prospects for peace and the peace process. That remains our position for now.

**Ms Nusrat Ghani** (Wealden) (Con): President Trump’s recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel isolates the USA. It has been condemned by European and middle eastern leaders, and even by Pope Francis. All say that this hostile act is ignorant and undermines the delicate peace process. Will the Minister confirm that we robustly maintain, with the States, a position of seeking a two-state solution, although I suggest he begins by pointing out where Jerusalem is to President Trump?

**Alistair Burt**: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I assure her that there is no change in the United Kingdom’s position, either on the final status of Jerusalem, or on the need for a two-state solution.

**Mr Ben Bradshaw** (Exeter) (Lab): Further to the Minister’s answer to the Liberal Democrat spokesman, the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), who asked, “If not now, when?”, the Minister will be aware that one of the most grievous consequences of this decision is the impact on Palestinian public opinion. More and more people are giving up on a two-state solution. With Britain’s particular historical
responsible, is it not time to honour the overwhelming vote in this House back in 2014 and recognise Palestine as a state?

Alistair Burt: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, I make frequent visits to the region—I was there recently—and yesterday I expressed to the Palestinian representative in London my views on the President of the United States’ anticipated speech. Recognition of the state of Palestine is not necessarily a consequence of what we heard yesterday. It is not tit for tat; it is more important than that. Accordingly, it should be a decision made by the United Kingdom at a time when we believe it is in the best interests of the process of peace. That is the view for now.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend confirm that UK aid contributions to the Palestinian Authority are significant in maintaining the stability of the region, as they have historically been, which will ultimately help to drive forward the negotiations on a two-state solution and the peaceful settlement that we wish to see?

Alistair Burt: Indeed. I spoke just last week to the Palestinian Authority’s Education and Finance Ministers to talk about the latest tranche of support that the United Kingdom is giving to the Palestinian Authority. It is provided in the clear belief and understanding that the Palestinian territories are moving towards statehood. That is the purpose of our support for them, and I re-emphasised that and made it clear. That is where the hope comes from, because there has to be hope for the Palestinians and those living on the west bank and in Gaza. It is our job to make sure that nothing in yesterday’s decision by another power makes that more difficult, and that is what we will be working towards.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that this is a sea change, not just another setback, because it removes America as an honest broker and changes the facts on the ground so that an independent Palestinian state is not really possible any more? That is the view of senior Palestinians such as Husam Zomlot and Saeb Erekat. What plans do the Government have to move matters forward in their discussions with the Palestinian Authority and the Palestine Liberation Organisation, and do they include at least a timetable for recognition?

Alistair Burt: I have said what I wanted to say on recognition. Let us talk about the peace process, which the hon. Gentleman started his question with. It appears clear that the position of the United States will have changed materially in the eyes of those working for peace in the region because of yesterday’s statement. I would draw attention—rightly, I hope—to the parts of the President’s speech dealing with the need for negotiations and a two-state solution, but the nature of the United States as a broker in the region will have been affected. I am sure that we will discuss tomorrow at the UN how the process can be taken forward. The United States will continue to play an important part, but there is no doubt that there is a trust deficit because of yesterday’s announcement. It is for other states to fill that gap, to ensure that the prospects for peace are not diminished.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Is the reality not that the peace process has been stalled for 24 years, since 1993, and that what we need following this announcement is direct peace talks between the state of Israel and the Palestinian representatives? If we can get from the United Nations a brokered position whereby those peace talks start, this decision could end up having been quite a good one.

Alistair Burt: I have no sense that yesterday’s decision made a contribution to advancing the peace process. I understand what the President said, and he had a particular logic in doing so, although I am not sure I share it. I do share the view my hon. Friend expressed in his last point—what happens in the region can be either a blow or an opportunity, but usually it is both. We must make sure that the opportunity provided by yesterday’s statement is not lost. There is a new role for others to play, but ultimately it must be about what we can do to assist direct negotiations rather than push them back.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): Trump’s rush desperation to tick off every ill-judged, divisive campaign soundbite now threatens the peace process. Having been one of the most volatile geopolitical regions in the world, the Government have welcomed his words about a two-state solution, but those pronouncements count for little when his actions, coupled with the expansion of Israeli illegal settlements, mean that the prospect of a two-state solution seems more distant than ever. The Government are clearly limited in their ability to influence the US position, but surely it is now time for them to listen to the clear will of this House and for the UK to confirm our commitment to a two-state solution by recognising the state of Palestine, as we do the state of Israel.

Alistair Burt: I do not want to repeat what I said earlier, but the United Kingdom’s position has a degree of flexibility. The House is right that we have to make a collective judgment about when the time is right in the best interests of peace. The Government then have to make up their own mind about the circumstances and what is right, and they will do that, but colleagues’ views are known.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): President Trump has said that the United States remains committed to a two-state solution, but will my right hon. Friend confirm that the British Government will bepointing out to this country’s strongest ally that moving the American embassy to Jerusalem will be interpreted by many as American acquiescence in Israel’s illegal programme of settlement on the west bank, which is itself the biggest impediment to a two-state solution?

Alistair Burt: My right hon. Friend provides an analysis of the consequences that is accepted by many.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): Is not the reality that President Trump’s announcement yesterday has fatally undermined the US’s credibility in brokering a peace between Israel and Palestine? In that light, is it not more vital than ever that the UK and the European Union demonstrate—in deed, as well as in word—that respect for international law must be the cornerstone of any lasting peace? Will the Minister tell
the House what action he will take to implement in
practice the UK’s obligations under the paragraph in
UN Security Council resolution 2334, passed just under
12 months ago, that calls on all states
“to distinguish, in their relevant dealings, between the territory of
the State of Israel and the territories occupied since 1967”?

What, in practice, will Britain do to implement that?

**Alistair Burt:** As the hon. Gentleman knows, we have
followed both UN and EU practice in clearly labelling
produce from settlement areas—those areas that have
been occupied—and we have also been clear about that in
our advice to business. To that extent, we have
recognised the importance of following through on
resolution 2334, for which the United Kingdom of
course voted.

I would say to the hon. Gentleman, as I have said to
other Members, that many of these issues have, crucially,
to be decided in the final settlement between the parties.
There is a greater need for urgency about that this
morning than there was yesterday, and it is towards that
that the United Kingdom can and will bend its efforts,
which is why we are meeting partners tomorrow. I will
be in Paris tomorrow for a meeting of the international
support group for Lebanon, and we will be talking
about this on the margins. There is a need for greater
urgency and for making use of this opportunity.

**Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con):** Although we
absolutely disagree with the US moving its embassy,
will my right hon. Friend reassure me that we will
continue to seek, and work with the US to find, a
long-term two-state solution?

**Alistair Burt:** Thank you, hon. Friend. Yes, the work
of the two envoys continues. The United States will
obviously continue to play a part in such processes in
the region, and I refer to my earlier answers on what we
are trying to do to help this process.

**Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP):** I think the
Minister understands the perception of yesterday’s
announcement in the Palestinian community. What can
he do to prevent the complete erosion of faith in this
process by Palestinians seeking to find a two-state solution
and an accommodation on their border with Israel, and
would not recognition be such a move?

**Alistair Burt:** The first thing we can do is to make
clear our disagreement with the policy of the United
States. The second thing is to work with partners to
provide an assurance that the peace process will go on
and to give people hope. The third thing is to say that
the process must be continued with renewed urgency to
get the result that we all want. That is the UK’s position.

**Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con):** I know the Minister will
recognise that our relationship with the United States is
far deeper than the question of whoever happens to be
the current occupant of the White House, and the same
is true of our commitment to the peace process in the
middle east. Will he reassure me that we will stick to the
original vision in the Balfour declaration of two democratic,
prosperous states living side by side, and that we will
continue to seek such a solution?

**Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab):** May
I thank you, Mr Speaker, for your leadership on the
45th President of the United States? Several months
ago, you indicated your disinclination for him to address
Parliament, and you are being proved more and more
right by the day.

When the Minister meets his US counterpart at the
UN, will he convey to him the words of the young
Palestinian human rights activist—you hosted him at
the Amnesty International reception in your rooms
yesterday, Mr Speaker—who said that by taking this
unilateral decision, the President is flouting international
law, international consensus, and the hopes and dreams
of all those who harbour a wish for a two-state solution?

**Alistair Burt:** I am sure that the words cited by the
hon. Lady will be drawn to the attention of those in the
United States. It is our duty to ensure that hopes and
promises are not lost in these circumstances.

**John Howell (Henley) (Con):** I completely share the
Government’s view on this statement by the President
of the United States, but I do not believe that it brings
the process for a two-state solution to an end. Indeed, I
believe it gives greater emphasis to the work that we can
carry on to achieve that. Does the Minister agree?

**Alistair Burt:** As I said earlier, the peace process
towards a two-state solution will come to an end only
when the parties themselves feel that it cannot go any
further. It is vital that we and all our partners—including
the United States—reaffirm that commitment to the
two-state solution, and do our level best to ensure that
it is not lost.

**Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP):** Given
Trump’s previous attitude to settlements, it is clear that
this move might embolden further attempts at demolitions
and settlement expansion. Is the Minister aware of the
real risk that the west bank might be further subdivided?
We talk about a two-state solution, but before it is too
late, will he please recognise the state of Palestine?

**Alistair Burt:** I hear colleagues’ comments on that,
and the Government’s position is clear: it is better for us
to continue our efforts to support legal attempts to
prevent demolitions, which we do through our financial
support to the Norwegian Refugee Council, and to
allow cases to be taken to the Israeli courts. Seventy-nine
per cent. of all cases taken forward have resulted in
demolitions being stopped, and that is where our effective
action is on behalf of those people’s rights.

**Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con):** Although the
Minister acknowledges the right of any country to
decide where to locate its embassy, I fear that the
already fragile prospects for moving the peace process
forward are further and significantly diminished by this
move. In his welcome reaffirmation of the Government’s
commitment to a two-state solution, will the Minister
continue to devote his not-inconsiderable efforts to
driving that forward and delivering an Israel that is
secure within its borders and whose citizens are free from the threat of terrorism, living alongside a viable and truly independent Palestine?

Alistair Burt: My hon. Friend knows the region well, and he puts it very clearly—that is the hope of all Members of the House, and it has been for too long. We must now work out how we can move forward from this position with renewed urgency to make it happen.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Unlike any of his predecessors, President Trump has dangerously inflamed every frozen world conflict that he has addressed. Has the time come to see this man as someone who believes in America first, and the rest of the world nowhere? Should we now say that the invitation to him for an informal, or formal, visit is rescinded? People can be invited, and they can be disinvited.

Alistair Burt: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says. An invitation has been given and no date has been set, and that remains the position of the United Kingdom Government.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): This is the second urgent question that you have granted in as many weeks, Mr Speaker, so that Ministers can come to the Dispatch Box and condemn the egregious behaviour of the President of the United States. What is the point of the special relationship if such condemnations have absolutely no effect on the President’s behaviour? Can we even say that a special relationship still exists?

Alistair Burt: When a decision that we disagree with has been made by our friends, the special relationship gives Ministers the opportunity to explain our position on that to the House and the public, and to maintain that despite some of those decisions, the special relationship that is broad and deep across the piece goes on, even if we disagree with certain political decisions.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): UN Security Council resolution 465 of 1980, “Determines that all measures taken by Israel to change the physical character, demographic composition, institutional structure or status of the Palestinian and other Arab territories occupied since 1967, including Jerusalem...have no legal validity.” How is Israel complying with that?

Alistair Burt: The hon. Lady knows the region well—Israel is not complying with that. That is why we hold that land to be occupied, and why we voted for resolution 2334 that restated elements of what she has just said. We need now is leadership. Forty years ago, President Sadat came to Israel to make peace—that is one anniversary we have not said much about this year, and it should be remembered. It takes bold leadership by those in the region to make a difference, and perhaps after yesterday, it is now time to see more of that.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Diolch, Mr Speaker. Does the Minister agree that Jonathan Freedland, writing yesterday in *The Guardian*, summed up President Trump’s announcement best when he described it as an act of diplomatic arson?

Alistair Burt: It is not the responsibility of Ministers of the Crown to comment on articles by *Guardian* journalists, or any journalist, no matter what their opinions may be. The House will make a judgment, but the important thing for Ministers and Governments to talk about is how to de-escalate tensions and how to recognise positive elements in any situation in order to move forward. The place has enough rhetoric and enough people willing to take to the streets for all sorts of reasons. The United Kingdom will not play a part in that.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Let us be absolutely clear: this announcement is the latest incidence of the Trump Administration showing contempt for international law and the rest of the world. Let me ask the Minister again. Surely it is right, at the UN Security Council tomorrow, for the UK to commit, as most of the world has, to the long-overdue step of recognising the state of Palestine?

Alistair Burt: The United Kingdom will restate tomorrow our determination to see a final settlement with peace between the nations—two viable states—and our determination that the statehood we wish to see in Palestine is agreed. Our position is that we will recognise when it is the right time in relation to peace. We will make that decision.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is 12 years since I visited Ma’ale Adumim, a huge settlement just outside Jerusalem that is now home to 41,000 people. Emboldened by Trump’s decision, the Israeli Parliament is for the first time introducing a law to annex that settlement. Does the Minister agree that the legitimisation of a settlement built illegally on Palestinian land is a very dangerous move? Will he join me in condemning it?

Alistair Burt: The hon. Lady raises again the difficult issue of legality in relation to settlements. There is evidence that the Israeli Government have been influenced by the United States and others in some of their decisions, including legal decisions, in relation to Jerusalem. Our position remains clear: the settlements are illegal and must be dealt with as part of an overall settlement. We support challenges to the legality of the settlements, when it is legitimate and right to do so, by those who might be affected by them or by demolitions. That will remain the policy.

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr Speaker: I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that Her Majesty has signified her Royal Assent to the following Act:

Business of the House

11.2 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please update the House on the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): The business for the week commencing 11 December will include:

Monday 11 December—Second Reading of the Finance Bill.

Tuesday 12 December—Continuation in Committee of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill (day 6).

Wednesday 13 December—Continuation in Committee of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill (day 7).

Thursday 14 December—Debate on a motion on the equality of pension provision for women, followed by debate on a motion on hormone pregnancy tests. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 15 December—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 18 December will include:

Monday 18 December—Consideration in Committee of the Finance Bill (day 1).

Tuesday 19 December—Continuation in Committee of the Finance Bill (day 2).

Wednesday 20 December—Conclusion of consideration in Committee of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill (day 8).

Thursday 21 December—General debate on Russian interference in UK politics and society, followed by a general debate on matters to be raised before the forthcoming adjournment. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 22 December—The House will not be sitting.

Today is a day of celebration. I am sure colleagues across the House will join me in congratulating our fellow parliamentarians down under, who have today legalised gay marriage. Australia becomes the 25th country to recognise that marriage is a celebration of all love. It has been wonderful to see such happy and celebratory scenes in its Parliament.

In further good news, today marks the commissioning of the UK’s new aircraft carrier, HMS Queen Elizabeth. Her Majesty herself will be the guest of honour at the event, and we hope that it is a huge success.

Let me also wish good luck to the five cities that will find out this evening which of them will be crowned the UK’s city of culture. It is a tough choice between Stoke-on-Trent, Swansea, Sunderland, Coventry and Paisley, but I know that the successful city will do the entire country proud.

My final bit of good news concerns the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz). I am sure the whole House will join me in wishing her a very happy birthday. I look forward to our catch-up later, when I have no doubt that we shall have a piece of cake together.

Valerie Vaz: Follow that, as they say. I just say that the number has been printed incorrectly: the digits should be reversed for my age. [Laughter.]

I thank the Leader of the House for updating us on the business for the next few weeks. It is more or less settled, subject, I suppose, to a few phone calls. Obviously, we were expecting a statement from the Prime Minister earlier this week.

We know the business for 11 January: the debate on restoration and renewal has been fixed. Can the Leader of the House update us on the rest of the business for that week? On the subject of R&R, does she agree that, given the recent legal action by Unite and the GMB, and given that more than £10 million was paid out last year to more than 250 working people who had been denied a job because their names had appeared on a blacklist, we should look carefully at any future bids for contracts to ensure that that illegal activity—which has ruined lives—does not take place again? Is the Leader of the House in a position to publish the motion on R&R before Christmas, so that Members can have a chance to amend it?

May I ask the Leader of the House to correct the record? The Chancellor—I notified him that I would raise this matter today—said in his Budget statement:

“We have heard a lot of talk recently from the Opposition about what they would do to crack down on tax avoidance... but the truth is that they did not.”—[Official Report, 22 November 2017; Vol. 631, c. 1054-5.]

He said that he was doing the job that Labour Governments had failed to do. That is totally incorrect. When I asked the House of Commons Library what Labour Governments had done, it supplied a list of the measures in 14 Budgets that Labour had implemented to protect our tax revenues. I will write to the Chancellor and the Leader of the House on the matter. I place that on the record. I will place it on my website as well. It is important to say that tax measures to protect our revenues were introduced. That is important because the deficit is the difference between what the Government spend and what they receive. If they are reducing the tax base and cutting jobs at Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, it is hard to know where they will find the money, and that is why there have been cuts in public services and people are living in poverty.

Even as we acknowledge the 75th anniversary of the publication of the Beveridge report, the board of the Government’s Social Mobility Commission resigns en masse, including a highly respected Conservative former Secretary of State for Education, who is now in the other place. The board has said that “the government seems unable to devote the necessary energy and focus to the social mobility agenda”.

According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s “UK Poverty 2017” report, published a few days later, nearly one in three disabled people are living in poverty, while 30% of children and 16% of pensioners live in relative poverty; that figure has risen by 3% in recent years. When will we have an urgent debate on the state of poverty in the UK, and when will there be new appointments to the board of the Social Mobility Commission?

Let me now turn to the invisible papers, as I call them. I have a few questions: who, what, where and why. We know who, because the motion was very clear: the
Secretary of State had to give the papers to the Exiting the European Union Committee. What is in the papers? In October 2016, they were called assessments; in December 2016, they were sets of analyses. As for the “where”, it is highly bizarre. Members must make an appointment, and must arrive five minutes early. They will then be escorted by a Government official to a room where they can look at the papers. They cannot take mobile phones into the room; they must take notebooks. Presumably they will be given a stubby pencil, or perhaps a pen containing invisible ink. As I say, that is bizarre. We are elected representatives, and we are entitled to see the papers.

Then there is the “why”. If there is nothing in the papers, why are the Government so secretive? But there is a bigger “why”: why have the Government not conducted the impact assessments, given that Brexit is affecting 88% of our economy?

I join the Leader of the House in celebrating gay marriage in Australia, but, more importantly, Sunday is human rights day, and Amnesty International asks us to remember our actions that freed Albert Woodfox, who was held in the USA for over 43 years in solitary confinement, Phyoe Phyoe Aung in Burma, and Yecenia Armenta Graciano, who was detained and tortured in Mexico. They all said on their release that that was a result of the role played by Amnesty International.

You, Mr Speaker, yesterday launched in Speaker’s House “Write for Rights” with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State had to give the papers to the Exiting the European Union Committee. What is in the papers? In October 2016, they were called assessments; in December 2016, they were sets of analyses. As for the “where”, it is highly bizarre. Members must make an appointment, and must arrive five minutes early. They will then be escorted by a Government official to a room where they can look at the papers. They cannot take mobile phones into the room; they must take notebooks. Presumably they will be given a stubby pencil, or perhaps a pen containing invisible ink. As I say, that is bizarre. We are elected representatives, and we are entitled to see the papers.

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You, Mr Speaker, yesterday launched in Speaker’s House “Write for Rights” with my right hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd), chair of the all-party group on human rights. Amnesty International wants us to write for its Turkey director Idil Eser and chair Taner Kilic, as well as nine other Turkish human rights defenders.

I know the whole House will join me in thanking the Burgundy town of Avalon, which named one of its streets Rue Jo Cox, and there is a sign that reads “British MP. Killed for her convictions”. We condemn those who support her killer and his group, we stand with those who oppose them and, of course, we salute the silence breakers.

Finally, Mr Speaker, may I congratulate you and Sally on your wedding anniversary?

Andrea Leadsom: I was not aware that it was your wedding anniversary, Mr Speaker: congratulations.

I join the hon. Lady in remembering Jo Cox and congratulating that community in France which has recognised her memory and the work she did to promote human rights and cohesive communities. She will never be forgotten, and all hon. Members would want to remember her.

The hon. Lady raised the issue of blacklisting. She will be pleased to know that it has been made clear in all our procurement contracts that none of our suppliers may engage in blacklisting activities, and we have received an assurance from HMRC that for the work with the contractor for the restoration of Big Ben and Elizabeth Tower. I share the hon. Lady’s concern about that issue.

The hon. Lady pleads that the Labour Government did a lot to reduce tax avoidance, but the fact is that since 2010 Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs has generated £160 billion in tax revenue from measures to stop avoidance and evasion. That is an extraordinary and strong achievement on which we should congratulate HMRC and also this Government, because all too often the Opposition talk the talk but do not walk the walk; they simply do not achieve what they promise. Under this Government, the top 1% are paying 27% of all taxes, and the top 5% nearly half of all taxes. People who earn more have never been taxed more than under this Government, so progressive taxation is a feature of our Government’s achievements—far more so than when Labour was in office.

The hon. Lady talked about the Social Mobility Commission. She is right to point out that Alan Milburn made a great show and dance of resigning from a job and role that was actually coming to an end. I point out to the hon. Lady the amazing achievement just this week on children’s literacy in our schools in England: England is joint eighth in the world for reading as a result of this Government’s changes to phonics and the amazing dedication of teachers across the country.

As shown by our Green Paper on mental health, Conservative Members are determined to ensure that there is parity of esteem between mental and physical health. Six hundred thousand more disabled people are in work now than in 2010. That is a record of achievement that we on this side of the House are proud of. Of course there are 600,000 fewer children in workless households than in 2010. Those are all things designed to support young people. They are measures that Conservative Members have put in place and have been determined to make progress on.

Finally, the hon. Lady talks about the impact assessments. The Opposition have generated an enormous amount of headlines and publicity over this issue, but the House will be interested to learn that the sum total of 16 Members of this House and the House of Lords have taken the trouble to go and see that analysis that has been made available. Hon. Members should also respect the fact that the freedom of civil servants to discuss matters and give advice freely to Ministers must be upheld. That is why it is important to hold these reports in a confidential and secure way. Those who need to read them or have an interest in reading them can do so, but I say again that only 16 Members across both Houses have availed themselves of that opportunity.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): We have outlawed forced marriage in this country, but could we have a debate on children of 16 still being able to be married with the consent of their parents, instead of waiting until they are 18? That seems to be an anomaly that we should fix.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a question that many people have concerns about—namely, the safety of our children until they reach an age at which they can make decisions for themselves. There has been a long-standing law that young people can marry at the age of 16, however, and I think it unlikely that that will be reviewed in the near future.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week, and I join her in sending congratulations to Australia. I wish the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) happy birthday, and I wish you a happy wedding anniversary, Mr Speaker.
[Pete Wishart]

Well, what a week! They do not come much more dramatic than that. Just when we thought that this chaotic Brexit cluelessness could not get any worse, this Government went and surprised us all over again. I am actually now embarrassed that my nation of Scotland is caught up in this total and utter disaster. We did not go looking for any of this, and we certainly did not vote for it, but all of a sudden the institutions of my nation are caught up in the collateral of this disaster. I know that this Government are now totally in thrall to the Democratic Unionist party, and I only hope that the Leader of the House shared the business statement with its Members in advance, just in case she has to hastily redraft it if they do not like it.

The farce around the Brexit analysis papers still goes on, six weeks following the binding vote of this House. These analysis papers simultaneously detail 50 to 60 sectoral impacts while at the same time not existing at all. They are Schrödinger’s Brexit analysis papers. What is becoming clear is that there were never any such papers, yet for some reason the Government took it upon themselves to boast about their existence to the point at which the House passed a binding vote to produce papers that did not even exist. If that is not contempt of Parliament, I do not know what is. The Secretary of State really should be considering his position this morning.

We considered the devolution parts of the repeal Bill this week, but everyone noted that the Bill as it is currently constituted—particularly the provisions around clause 1!—is not fit for purpose and will deeply damage the devolution settlement. Today, however, those clauses remain in place in the Bill. Yesterday, the Secretary of State for Scotland said that he would table amendments on Report, and he will obviously be held to that, but will the Leader of the House ensure that they are tabled early so that the Scottish Government can assess them, to judge whether they are sufficient to deal with the many threats that are being posed to devolution?

Lastly, Mr Speaker, I also congratulate all the cities competing to be the UK city of culture in 2021, but I am sure that you will forgive us if we on these Benches do not know what is. The Secretary of State really should be considering his position this morning.

We will always understand the hon. Gentleman’s desire to support his own local contender—that is absolutely acceptable—but we in the Westminster Parliament congratulate all the cities involved and wish them all luck.

The hon. Gentleman asks about the claim that there has been a contempt of Parliament. I must utterly refute that. The Government have satisfied the motion, providing the House of Commons Exiting the European Union Committee with information covering 58 sectors of the economy. We were always clear that the analysis did not exist in the form that Parliament requested, but the Department for Exiting the European Union has taken time to bring together the analysis that we have in a way that meets the request of Parliament—that is, to provide Parliament with the respect that it due—and I think, Mr Speaker, that you have now had recognition from the Brexit Committee that it considers that matter closed.

The hon. Gentleman also asked about consultation with the devolved Administrations. It has been made clear that the close consultation with all those Administrations, including Scotland, will continue on all subjects relating to the bright future that we believe lies ahead for the United Kingdom once we leave the European Union.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the nuisance telephone calls that are made randomly by cold-callers? Only yesterday, I was driving along the A13 when a young lady came on the phone—it was hands free—to say that she had heard I had been involved in a road accident, to which I replied, “If I get one more call, I will be involved in a road accident.”

Andrea Leadsom: I am pleased that my hon. Friend drives carefully and that he was using a hands-free device, but he raises an important point of concern for many of our constituents. In the past, the Information Commissioner’s Office had to prove that a company was causing substantial damage or distress by its conduct before action could be taken, but the Government have now changed the law to make it much easier for nuisance-call companies to be hit with fines of up to £500,000. That is a welcome step, but my hon. Friend may like to seek a Westminster Hall debate or raise the matter at Digital, Culture, Media and Sport questions to discuss it further with Ministers.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I am sure that the Leader of the House will agree that winter is beginning to bite, and accident and emergency departments up and down the country are struggling to cope with demand. According to a report this morning, a million people are now not being seen within four hours at A&E. The A&E in Huddersfield is threatened with closure, so may we have an early debate on A&E, the shortage of beds, the shortage of doctors and the shortage of common sense in this Government?

Andrea Leadsom: Thanks to the hard work and dedication of staff and record levels of funding, the hon. Gentleman will be aware that the NHS is more prepared for winter this year than ever before. We know that the NHS is facing increased pressure this winter, which is why it has robust plans in place that are supported by an extra £335 million announced in the Budget on top of the previously announced £100 million to support A&E departments. More than 1,000 extra beds have been freed up nationally since February by reducing delayed transfers of care, and areas continue to work to increase that number to more than 2,000 to 3,000 extra beds over the winter period.

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): Will the Leader of the House consider holding a debate on access to NHS dentists in rural areas? Oral health in children is reaching crisis levels, with almost a quarter of five-year-olds suffering from tooth decay—the No. 1 cause of hospital admission for that age group. Selsey in my constituency has a population of 12,000 and growing, but not a single NHS dentist. This matter should be debated to ensure that everyone, irrespective of where they live, can have access to good NHS dental care.
Andrea Leadsom: I am really sorry to hear of the problems in my hon. Friend’s constituency, and she is quite right to raise them. NHS England has a legal duty to commission primary care NHS dental services to meet local needs. Access has improved significantly in recent years, but more needs to be done. I encourage my hon. Friend to seek an Adjournment debate so that she can raise the specific problems in her constituency.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): May I wish you felicitations for your wedding anniversary, Mr Speaker? Also, I am glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) is still at the stage where the candles do not cost more than the cake, and I wish her a very happy birthday. [Laughter.] There is a very fine line, Mr Speaker.

I ask the Leader of the House for an early indication of availability for Backbench Business Committee time after Christmas. I know that we will be discussing the restoration of the Palace on the first Thursday after Christmas, but I hope that we will get some time on the following Thursday, because the debate on RBS Global Restructuring Group, which was deferred last week, was heavily endorsed, and we are already anticipating applications for debates on really quite important matters.

As for the Brexit sectoral analysis or impact assessments, the north-east of England has a particular set of problems when it comes to the UK economy, and even if there is no sectoral impact assessment for anywhere else, we would like one for the north-east. Our part of the country currently has a balance of payments surplus in manufacturing, and there will be a great deal of concern among businesses in all sectors if nothing has been outlined for our region’s future.

Andrea Leadsom: As ever, I am sympathetic to the hon. Gentleman’s request for more time for Backbench Business Committee debates, and particularly for the important rescheduled debate on RBS Global Restructuring Group. He mentions the impact assessment on issues specific to the north-east, and I am sure he will be reassured that since 2010 unemployment is down 41% in the north-east and 44,000 more children are at good or outstanding schools. Nevertheless, he makes a good point. I assure him that the Government are committed to making a success of leaving the EU for all parts of the United Kingdom.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I was hoping Sir Desmond was going to help out, because he is always a master of brevity—[Laughter.] His questions do not take much time, anyway. They are always very brief. I call Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): Following your guidance, Mr Speaker, I have a simple question. We are going to build more houses in this country, which is welcome. A local estate agent, Greenslade Taylor Hunt, has been caught price fixing. May we have a debate on stopping estate agents from abusing their position when we want to build more houses for young people?

Andrea Leadsom: I completely agree that we want to build more houses for all people in this country, and particularly for young people. There are no Communities and Local Government questions until next year, so instead I suggest that my hon. Friend writes to me on that point. I will take it up with him.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Last week I raised with the Leader of the House the possibility of having a debate on the position of Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan, particularly the three who were sentenced to death because of their beliefs. Now we understand that Captain Muhammad Safdar, the parliamentarian who raised the issues that led, the day after, to the Ahmadi’s imprisonment, is about to visit the UK. May we have a debate on what the Government will say to him about the Ahmadi’s plight?

Andrea Leadsom: Again, the hon. Lady raises an important issue. I am sure she will be in touch with Foreign Office Ministers to reflect her views, and I am sure they will be very happy to respond to her question on what the official line will be when this man visits.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): My constituent had a £200,000 offer on his house shortly before phase 2 of High Speed 2 was announced. HS2 Ltd has now valued the house at £185,000. Can I have a statement from the relevant Minister on how HS2 Ltd is instructing these valuations?

Andrea Leadsom: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this very important matter, which was of great concern to my constituents and, indeed, yours, Mr Speaker, during the first phase of HS2. I continue to challenge HS2 Ltd on a number of constituents’ house purchase matters that have been long outstanding. I urge my hon. Friend to seek an Adjournment debate or a Westminster Hall debate to get a further response from Ministers on what more can be done to ensure that HS2 Ltd is addressing all constituents’ concerns fairly.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): The Association of Medical Research Charities has now published its report on greater access to off-patent drugs on the frontline, to which many stakeholders have contributed, including me as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on off-patent drugs. May we have a debate on how to continue our cross-party agenda to increase access to off-patent drugs?

Andrea Leadsom: All Members have particular constituency issues concerning off-patent drugs, which is an incredibly important area. I see that there are Health questions on 19 December, so the hon. Gentleman
[Andrea Leadsom]

might want to raise it then. I am sure there would be a lot of demand from Members for a debate on the subject.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): I am concerned about the way the Boundary Commission for England is operating its consultation, because 5,957 respondents—96% of all people consulted in Morecambe and Lunesdale—said they wanted to keep Morecambe and Lunesdale intact. Both parties agree that the communities of Lancaster and Morecambe should be kept separate, and since then more than 1,000 more submissions have been put in.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is raising an important point. The Boundary Commissions for England, Scotland and Wales published revised proposals for constituencies on 17 October, and the consultation does not end until 11 December. He is right to raise this issue in this place and to encourage more respondents to come forward before the closure.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Last month, I met my constituents Margaret and Richard in Parliament at an event organised by CRY—Cardiac Risk in the Young. Sadly, the reason they were there is that they lost their son, Tom Hardman, a talented local cricketer who died of sudden cardiac death. May we have a debate in Government time on the work done by CRY and how we might prevent the 600 such deaths every year?

Andrea Leadsom: I am so sorry to hear about that tragic case; and, as the hon. Lady says, there are too many of them—600 cases a year. It is right to raise these issues in this Chamber and I encourage her to seek an Adjournment debate on this.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I received an email this week from two of my constituents whose mother is a former member of the Women’s Auxiliary Air Force and was stationed at Bletchley Park during world war two. She is now being cared for at the Royal British Legion care home, Dunkirk Memorial House, in my constituency. They just wanted to express their immense praise and thanks for the fantastic care their mother and other veterans have received in these homes. Will the Leader of the House therefore join me in praising the staff at Dunkirk House, and will she pass the message to the Ministry of Defence about how important these Royal British Legion care homes are to our veterans?

Andrea Leadsom: I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in praising the excellent work carried out by the staff at the Royal British Legion’s Dunkirk Memorial House in her constituency. All six of the Legion’s care homes around the country make an enormous difference to the lives of ex-servicemen and women and their families, and I know that my colleagues in the Defence team recognise that.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): A recent joint police and Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency operation in Bradford on uninsured and untaxed vehicles has resulted in 540 untaxed vehicles being identified and 29 vehicles being seized in one week because their drivers had no insurance. Nationally, figures are rising on this, with the highest tax evasion rate for more than a decade. Will the whole House join me in congratulating West Yorkshire police on their initiative in Operation Steerside to tackle dangerous driving in Bradford? Will the Leader of the House grant parliamentary time to discuss this issue?

Andrea Leadsom: I join the hon. Lady in congratulating her local police force on tackling this; it sounds like an enormous achievement. Again, I encourage her to seek an Adjournment debate to raise these specific points and to share best practice in catching this type of evasion.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am hoping that somebody might conceivably manage a single-sentence question. I call Mr Stephen Kerr.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Last week, the Royal Bank of Scotland, which is 72%-owned by the taxpayer, announced the closure of 259 branches, including branches in my constituency in Bannockburn, Dunblane and Bridge of Allan, with the loss of 680 jobs. Will the Leader of the House provide a debate, in Government time, on the announcement of these closures and the future of retail banking in this country?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is a strong champion for his constituency and he raises an important point. All banks must now comply with the access to banking standard, which requires consultation and careful thought before closures. He will also be aware that the Post Office now provides access to basic banking services for all retail banks. Nevertheless, he raises an important point and I encourage him to pursue it, perhaps with the Financial Conduct Authority or with this bank itself.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): In recent weeks, I have noticed an increase in immigration casework. I have previously written to the Home Office about the effect that delays are having on my constituents. Data published by the Department last week showed that only 62% of MPs’ letters and 72% of emails are being responded to within its standard service timescale. May we please have a debate on the modernisation of Home Office correspondence so that Members and their constituents can receive responses in a timely fashion?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises an important point. Many of us have constituency cases related to visa challenges. I know from speaking to the Home Office that often the problem is one of slow responses from overseas countries to inquiries. It is difficult to totally be in control of response times, but she might want to raise her important point at Home Office questions.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): This is an important week in the taxi trade, because the world’s first purpose-built electric taxi, made by the London Electric Vehicle Company
in Ansty Park in my constituency, has been certified for use in London. May we have a debate about how investment in electrification can help to meet environmental objectives?

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate my hon. Friend on that achievement in his constituency. It is great news for London and it is certainly great news for Rugby. The Government are fully committed to reducing the carbon footprint of our transport system. This is a great new step that will certainly provide relief for many people living in London.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Research carried out by the Citizen Sense project at Goldsmith’s in my constituency shows that pollution in south-east London reached six times the World Health Organisation limit on several occasions during the past year. Can we have a debate on this important public health issue?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady will no doubt have been delighted to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) mention the first London-certified electric taxi, which was built in his constituency. She raises an issue that matters enormously to all of us. The Government are determined to tackle the problem of air pollution, not only in London but right around the country. We are taking strong steps to encourage and help local authorities to pay for new pollution-free zones. Equally, she should speak to the Mayor of London, who, of course, has the challenge of putting in place measures to reduce the poor air quality in our great city.

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): Given that we came eighth in an international reading test only this week, can we have a debate about phonics and the underlying teaching of literacy, so that we can make all children great readers?

Andrea Leadsom: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. That great achievement demonstrates just how far the Government’s teaching reforms have taken us. I again praise all teachers for their amazing dedication, and congratulate the children themselves on England delivering its best result since 2001, which was in no small part thanks to our increased emphasis on phonics.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): Many Conservative MPs said in this House on Monday that clause 11 of the Investment in electrification can help to meet environmental objectives. That is what we have been doing and what we will continue to do.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Reports suggest that some 800 British citizens may have gone to fight for the evil death cult Daesh in Iraq and Syria. My right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary and, indeed, the Foreign and Commonwealth Minister for Africa, my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), have both indicated that those individuals will not be allowed to return to the UK and may be hunted down and killed. Will my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House arrange for a statement to be made before Christmas, because this is clearly a policy matter of great importance to Members across the House?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue. I pay tribute to the amazing work of this country’s counter-intelligence people, who, as we have heard recently, have thwarted multiple terror efforts in this country. It is important that we continue to support them. We continue to invest in counter-terrorism. My hon. Friend raises the question of what we do to stop terrorists coming back to this country from overseas. It is clearly the case that we need to use every means at our disposal to do so.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Could the Leader of the House do something, or could we have a debate, about the Government publishing routine information? I have been trying for 15 months to get the Library’s taskforce dataset published and have had various answers that it will be published in due course or in the near future, whatever that means. If the Government can publish papers that do not exist, surely they can publish papers that do exist so that hon. Members and the public can see them.

Andrea Leadsom: If the hon. Gentleman wants to write to me about that, I will take it up on his behalf.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): When I visited the excellent Trinity High School in Redditch recently, I had the privilege of speaking to the wonderful young people there. I asked them about their experience of being teenagers in today’s world, and they told me about some of the pressures they faced because of social media and other aspects of their lives. Will the Leader of the House join me in welcoming the massive boost to children’s and young people’s mental health services, and will she work with the Department of Health to make sure that this funding gets to where it is really needed on the ground in Redditch and elsewhere?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is right. Young people face huge challenges, including unique challenges from social media and cyber-bullying. The Government’s Green Paper on mental health seeks to alleviate those and to address the problem at its core. It is important to build, in the earliest years, the robust emotional strength that young people can then rely on throughout the rest of their lives.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): The Leader of the House will have seen that Virgin Care has sued the NHS, and that approach was familiar to me, as the company threatened me when I raised its dubious practices in
the House. Will she consider a debate on the matter and make it clear that she will defend our NHS and Members from intimidation by private corporations such as Virgin?

Andrea Leadsom: Absolutely. Across the House, we share a commitment to the NHS and to its services being free at the point of delivery. We will always defend the NHS against any external threats, including from private providers. On the other hand, some private provision has been incredibly beneficial to patients and the cost base of the NHS, and we should not overlook that.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): My constituent recently received a demand for payment of £160 from parking contractors on behalf of his local Lidl supermarket while he shopped there for about 15 minutes. He wrote to the chief executive, who was distinctly uninterested in solving the case. May we have a debate on the abuse of parking charges by certain private companies?

Andrea Leadsom: We all share my hon. Friend’s frustration about some of the appalling abuses carried out by private parking enforcement organisations. I share his concern, and he should seek an Adjournment debate so that other Members can hear about the situation.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The British Association of Social Workers advised its members this week that it considered it unethical and degrading to subject a woman to the disclosure of an incident of rape to a third party just to access benefits. It joins a list including the Scottish Government, Unison, the British Medical Association and the Royal College of Nursing. May we have a debate on the growing condemnation of this Government’s two-child policy and the rape clause?

Andrea Leadsom: We fully recognise that this is a difficult and sensitive issue, but I assure the hon. Lady that the mother will never be questioned about the incident by a member of staff from the Department for Work and Pensions or Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs. They will simply take the claim and receive supporting professional third-party evidence. There would not be any requirement for evidence of a criminal conviction or a judicial finding. We have consulted on how the exemption should be implemented, and we have adjusted our approach to make sure that women get the support that they need and that additional financial support goes to those for whom it was intended.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I am afraid that a steelworkers’ pension scandal is brewing. My constituents are worried about making the wrong decision on pension transfers, and the Financial Conduct Authority is providing insufficient support to steelworkers at this crucial time. May we have a ministerial statement and an action plan from the FCA to support steelworkers who are trying to do the right thing for their families?

Andrea Leadsom: Pensions are a complex subject, and anybody trying to make decisions needs the right advice. The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the issue and I encourage him to seek further guidance from the FCA so that he can provide support to his constituents.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): When are we going to have a statement on the rights of EU nationals, particularly Irish citizens, many of whom have lived in this country for decades? Even if the Government cannot sort out anything else on EU withdrawal, please may we have a statement on this matter, which is causing anxiety to millions of people?

Andrea Leadsom: I am surprised to hear the hon. Gentleman seek that reassurance. The Prime Minister has made it very clear on numerous occasions, including in her Florence speech, that all EU citizens will be able to carry on living their lives as before. We have committed to incorporating our agreement on citizens’ rights fully into UK law.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Can we have a statement from the Home Office regarding Abubelcir Oncu, a constituent of mine who lost his passport in Turkey? He has indefinite leave to remain, but has been stuck in Turkey for three months, even though he has a replacement passport. His wife is pregnant. Will the Leader of the House please look into this for me?

Andrea Leadsom: That is a concerning case. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is already in contact with UK Visas and Immigration. If he wants to write to me, I will be happy to look into the matter on his behalf me.

Mr Speaker: I say very gently to the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), who is a most perspicacious Member, that the Leader of the House is not, to the best of knowledge, chief executive of, or another worker for, Citizens Advice. Although the hon. Gentleman was allowed to continue with his question, questions should be about the business for next week. Therefore, my little hint to him is that he should seek to get into his inquiry a reference to a request for a statement or a debate. That is very much the correct form for business questions. It is not quite the same thing as asking, “Will you have a look into something for me and let me know?” Nevertheless, we will let the hon. Gentleman off on this occasion, and I give that advice in the friendliest possible spirit.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): May I send the very best wishes from the current city of Hull to the new city of Hull? Radio Humberside this week reported that there has been an upsurge in the use of mopeds to commit antisocial behaviour, and nuisance and criminal offences, in Orchard Park in my constituency. May we have a debate to discuss why this is happening and the practical steps we can take to deal with it, because it is a problem not just in Hull? We want to be on the side of decent people against this kind of yob culture.

Andrea Leadsom: I think that we all share the hon. Lady’s concern. We have seen an extraordinary rise in moped crime, which the Home Office is very concerned about. I am sure that the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee would be delighted to hear from the hon. Lady with a suggestion of a cross-party debate on the matter.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Will the Leader of the House make time available for a debate on why the Government have conducted an
impact assessment into gravity foul sewers and lateral drains, but not into the UK leaving the European Union.

Kevin Brennan: Smells!

Andrea Leadsom: So we are back to the Government smelling, are we?

The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) is being quite deliberately flippant. As he will know, the Government have produced sectoral analysis, which has now been provided in a form that is useful to Parliament in accordance with the requirements of the motion passed by this House. Therefore, the Government have fulfilled the request that was made. I sincerely hope that the right hon. Gentleman is enjoying looking at and learning from that sectoral analysis.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): It has now been two years since the Glasgow city deal was announced, yet in recent days we have heard that the Scottish Government agency Transport Scotland is backsliding on its commitment to deliver the flagship Glasgow airport rail link, having sabotaged the project a decade ago. The people of Glasgow are tired of this Government not following through on promises. How much longer are we going to wait for this project, so will the Leader of the House come along and discuss it with her?

Andrew Leadsom: As a former Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Secretary, I can say to the hon. Gentleman that we are proud to have some of the highest animal welfare standards in the world. It is in fact the EU that prevents the UK from looking at measures to curb further the export of live animals. However, on the movement of live animals, I would gently say to the hon. Gentleman that the issue is not the exports, but the distance that animals have to travel without proper care—food, drink, rest and so on. That is the issue he should be concerned with, not the export or distant travel of those animals. The Government remain absolutely committed to doing everything we can to further improve the welfare of animals as we leave the EU.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Last week, Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary reported that the new centralised air support service for police forces in Wales and England was not fit for purpose, with the communities I serve waiting over an hour for a response. Can we have a Home Office statement on the report so that we can debate the failings of the centralised service, which was introduced by the Prime Minister when she was Home Secretary?

Andrea Leadsom: We are always extremely grateful to our police forces for the work that they do. The hon. Gentleman raises a point of which I am not specifically aware, but he might wish to raise it at Home Office questions or through an Adjournment debate so that he can get further information.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Since 2012, two thirds of Britain’s total waste plastic exports have been shipped to China and Hong Kong. From January, that is going to stop—China is going to ban those imports. May we have an urgent statement from the Environment Secretary about where we are going to send our plastic waste in the new year?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sure that the hon. Lady will appreciate that this Government have been totally committed to doing as much as possible to protect our environment, and particularly our marine environment, through our introduction of the blue belt, the protected areas around our coastline, our proposal to ban microbeads in face-cleansing products and so on. This Government have banned the use of plastic bags without a charge, and we have seen a massive improvement in the amount of recycling. We are fully committed to doing all that we can to protect our environment. Should the hon. Lady wish to seek an Adjournment debate on this matter, I am sure that Ministers will be delighted to come along and discuss it with her.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Nepal has passed a new criminal code Bill, which criminalises so-called blasphemy and the conversion of others. There is widespread concern that this code will be used to target religious minorities and will have an impact on religious freedom, human rights and tolerance in Nepal. Would the Leader of the House agree to a ministerial statement on this important issue?

Andrea Leadsom: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman about the importance of religious freedoms and looking after the rights of minorities such as those he mentions, so I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate on that subject.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): May we have the debate on the Royal Bank of Scotland and its treatment of small business customers as soon as possible, and certainly before the Government flog off their shares and avoid accountability?

Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Gentleman will have been pleased to see that RBS is recovering. He talks about the Government flogging off their shares. The Government intend to return RBS to the private sector and to recoup, as far as possible, the money that the taxpayer had to use to bail it out. That is the right and proper thing to do. He is absolutely right that the debate about the restructuring group was important, and the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee, is seeking to reschedule it just as soon as he can.
Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): In among the spin about how powerful the Scottish Tories now are and how they secured the £40 million VAT exemption for police and fire services, I highlighted yesterday that that had actually come at the cost of £265 million per Scottish Tory. If they genuinely did do so much work on the VAT exemption, will the Leader of the House make a statement outlining why the Chancellor was not able to give me in writing the date of one meeting with any one of the 12 Back-Bench Scottish Tories on VAT exemption?

Andrea Leadsom: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman recognises the amazing work done by my hon. Friends the Scottish Conservatives. I share his enthusiasm for their assiduousness in looking after the interests of their constituents. I am sure he will be delighted, as I am, that in our Budget a couple of weeks ago, the Chancellor was able to confirm a £2 billion consequential budget boost for the Scottish Parliament.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The Leader of the House will recall that, eight months ago, I informed her that the HSBC bank in Maesteg was closing. Now, NatWest bank is closing in Maesteg and in Pencoed, leaving my whole constituency with one bank. May I press her for an urgent statement from Treasury Ministers about what they can do to address the problem of banks closing across the length and breadth of this country?

Andrea Leadsom: As I said earlier, there is a new protocol under which banks must undertake to properly consult. As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, the footfall in bank branches has reduced significantly as people move to mobile banking. However, as we all recognise, in many of our communities there are older people who are perhaps not so mobile phone-savvy and will prefer to use paper banking. Post offices now offer basic banking services for all high street banks, and in many cases that means better opening hours and a better service for constituents. However, the hon. Gentleman is right to raise the point, and I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate in which he can talk about the specifics in his constituency.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): As we have heard, we will find out later today the winner of the competition to be UK city of culture 2021. Despite starting the process as an outsider, Paisley, after running a great campaign, is now one of the favourites—I am sure that we will do it. May we have a statement on this competition to raise awareness of the winner and our campaign?

Andrea Leadsom: Again, I wish all the competitors the best of luck. It is great to see the hon. Gentleman sticking up for his local applicant, and I do wish him every success with it. I am sure that there will be plenty of opportunities for him to raise the issue directly with the Prime Minister, should he be successful.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): On 9 November last year, seven people lost their lives and many more were injured in the Croydon tram crash, which was the largest crash of its kind in 50 years. Today, the Rail Accident Investigation Branch is publishing its findings on the causes of the accident. I have had early sight of them, and it is clear that they will apply across all the tram networks of the UK. For the sake of those who died, many of whom were from New Addington, just on their way to work and never to return again, will the Secretary of State for Transport come to the Chamber to make a statement about how he will ensure that the recommendations of the investigation will be implemented as swiftly as possible so that this never happens again?

Andrea Leadsom: Certainly all Members, and I think the whole country, were horrified by what happened: it was an absolute tragedy. We all send our great condolences to the families and friends of all those who died. It is absolutely right, as the hon. Lady says, that we learn the lessons from the report. I will certainly be very happy to discuss what kind of feedback we can get from the Department as soon as possible.
Social Care

11.57 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price): This oral statement is the Government’s response to the recent Opposition day debate on social care on Wednesday 25 October. Since that debate, the Government announced further plans for the Green Paper on care and support for older people on 16 November. This oral statement reiterates the substance of that announcement while providing further detail to the House in some specific areas.

An ageing society means that we need to reach a longer-term sustainable settlement for social care. That is why the Government have committed to publishing a Green Paper by summer 2018 setting out their proposals for reform. An inter-ministerial group is overseeing this work. This builds on the additional £2 billion over the next three years that we have already provided to meet social care needs.

In developing the Green Paper, it is right that we take the time needed to debate the many complex issues and listen to the perspectives of experts and care users, building consensus around reforms which can succeed. That is why we are starting a process of initial engagement over the coming months through which the Government will work with experts, stakeholders and users to shape the long-term reforms that will be proposed in the Green Paper. The Government have asked a range of independent experts in this area to provide their views, including the leads of the two most recent reviews on social care, Andrew Dilnot and Kate Barker. We are also engaging closely with key stakeholders, and with people who use services and their carers. The Government will host a number of roundtables to hear a range of people who use services and their carers. The Government are also engaging closely with key stakeholders, and with social care, Andrew Dilnot and Kate Barker. We are including the leads of the two most recent reviews on independent experts in this area to provide their views, Green Paper. The Government have asked a range of independent experts in this area to provide their views, including the leads of the two most recent reviews on social care, Andrew Dilnot and Kate Barker. We are also engaging closely with key stakeholders, and with people who use services and their carers. The Government will host a number of roundtables to hear a range of people who use services and their carers.

Once the Green Paper is published, it will be subject to a full public consultation. The Government recognise that there is broad agreement across Parliament that reform of social care is a priority, and we look forward to working with parliamentarians to hear a range of views. We have already written to the chairs of relevant all-party parliamentary groups to invite them to meet us to discuss their priorities for and perspectives on reform.

The Prime Minister has been clear that the consultation will include proposals to place a limit on the care costs that individuals face. To allow for fuller engagement and the development of the approach, and so that reforms to the care system and how it is paid for are considered in the round, we will not take forward the previous Government’s plans to implement a cap on care costs in 2020. Further details of the Government’s plans will be set out after we have consulted on the options. The Green Paper will focus primarily on reform of care for older people, but will consider elements of the adult care system that are common to all recipients of social care.

We are committed to ensuring that people with disabilities and complex conditions can live healthy, independent lives, and participate fully in society. Many of the issues and questions about the sustainability of the care system will be relevant to adults of all ages. To ensure that
12.4 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I thank the Minister for giving me advance sight of her statement, but it is a woefully inadequate response to the Opposition day debate we held in this place on Wednesday 25 October and in no way addresses the motion passed by the House.

That motion called on the Government to note “the Conservative Party’s manifesto commitment to a funding proposal for social care which would have no cap on care costs and would include the value of homes in the means test for care at home”, and we called on the Government not to proceed with their commitment to those proposals. The Minister has today finally confirmed what many of us on the Opposition Benches suspected: they will not be proceeding with their plans to cap care costs by 2020, as legislated for by the House. This a shameful waste of taxpayers’ money. Over £1 million in today’s money was spent on the House. This a shameful waste of taxpayers’ money. It is no good for them to say that the Government are consulting on the parliamentary time enacting the cap. It is no good for her to say that the Government are consulting on the cap. They consulted on this during the general election, and their proposals were rejected by the electorate. Meanwhile, very many people are still faced with the catastrophic costs of paying for their care.

The motion also called on the Government “to remove the threat to withdraw social care funding from, and stop fines on, local authorities for Delayed Transfers of Care”. During the debate, I talked about how Ministers had previously threatened councils with fines and further funding cuts to social care if targets for cutting delayed transfers of care could not be met—fines for targets that half of social services directors believe to be unrealistic. Will the Minister confirm that the Government have listened to the will of the House and will stop these fines, which merely threaten to make the crisis in social care worse?

The motion also called on the Government “to commit to the extra funding needed to close the social care funding gap for 2017 and the remaining years of the 2017 Parliament.”—[Official Report, 25 October 2017; Vol. 630, c. 312.] At no point today has the Minister confirmed how the Government intend to enact the will of the House in meeting the funding gap—and of course, shamefully, there was no mention of social care in the recent Budget. Our social care system remains in a perilous state because of the cuts that this Government have chosen to make. The Care Quality Commission has told us that the social care system remains in a perilous state because of the cuts that this Government have chosen to make. Will she now confirm that the Government will enact the will of the House and meet the funding gap?

The Minister in her statement addressed the Government’s decision to include the views of carers in the upcoming Green Paper and their failure to respond to the consultation of 6,500 other carers that has already taken place. As I mentioned in the debate, Katy Styles, a carer and a campaigner for the Motor Neurone Disease Association, contributed to that consultation and hoped that her voice would be heard. She told me:

“Not publishing the National Carers Strategy has made me extremely angry. It sends a message that carers’ lives are unimportant. It sends a message that Government thinks we can carry on as we are. It sends a message that my own time is of little worth.”

Will the Minister give more details on the scope of the carers action plan and reassure those 6,500 carers that their time was not wasted?

The Government announced recently, and the Minister confirmed today, that working-age people with disabilities would be consulted as part of a “parallel” workstream to the Government’s Green Paper consultation. Why a parallel workstream? This is an extremely short-sighted approach to reforming social care, and far from one that looks at the system in the round. Will she give us more details about the parallel workstream for working-age people with disabilities who have social care needs?

It is clear that only a Labour Government can deliver much-needed reform to our social care system. Over the coming months, we will also consult experts on how we can move from the current broken system of care to a sustainable service for the long term. We will look at funding options for social care in the long term, such as a new social care levy, an employer care contribution and wealth taxes. These experts will help to clarify our options for funding our planned national care service, and our approach will be underpinned by the principle of pooled risk, so that no one faces catastrophic care costs, as they do now or as they would have done under the Conservative party’s earlier dementia tax proposals.

Jackie Doyle-Price: The hon. Lady will not be surprised to hear that I did not agree with much of what she said, but I will address some of her points.

Fundamentally, we are setting out, as has long been established, how to get a longer-term, sustainable system for funding our social care. It is absolutely clear from our debates during the past year that, as far as the public are concerned, there is a real lack of understanding about how, at present, the cost of care has to be met by the person who requires it. That is what leads to catastrophic care costs, and the dementia tax that she keeps mentioning, and that is exactly what we are going to tackle by having a cap on the overall cost. In doing so, it is very important to take the public with us and to have a fully informed public debate. It does not matter how far we think we have had such a debate in this place when legislating in the past, because it is quite clear that the public do not understand this. [ Interruption. ] We are only going to get public consent for a long-term solution if we have a public debate that is handled with maturity, and so far we have not seen very much of that.

The hon. Lady raised the issue of carers, and she suggested that carers’ voices are not being heard in this debate. [ Interruption. ] I say to her that they very much are being heard. [ Interruption. ] She can sit there and chunter, or she can listen to the answer to the question. It is entirely up to her, but it is rather a waste of my time in coming to this place if I am just going to be talked over. [ Interruption. ]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I say to the Government Whip that I think I can control the Chamber. I thank him for his help, but I have already told him once that he does not need to worry. [ Interruption. ] Order. The Whip is well aware that he is testing my patience. I do not need any help.

Jackie Doyle-Price: Carers’ voices very much are being heard, and there is no way we can actually tackle the broad picture of how we fund and manage social care need without properly considering the needs of carers. I am very grateful to the 6,500 people who responded to the call for evidence. We have listened to
them, and we will consider what they have said in bringing forward the Green Paper. In the meantime, it is very important to pull together exactly what support there is at present and then respond to that, and we will publish our action plan in January.

On working-age adults, the hon. Lady is right to some extent in that there are some common issues in the adult social care system that affect both care for the elderly and care for working-age adults, and those common issues will be considered as part of the Green Paper process. At the same time, however, we are going through massive change in how we deal with people with disabilities. We have the very brave ambition of getting more and more people into work and we are on a journey of getting people with learning disabilities out of long-term residential care and into work in the community, and that brings a separate set of challenges. That work will go on in parallel, but the work on the Green Paper will look at the common issues as well as at the specific area of care for the elderly. I hope that gives her some reassurance. We cannot look at this in a silo—[Interruption.]

She says this should all be looked at together—that has been the advice of all the commissions to the officials in Whitehall, and it is why we are taking this forward this debate in the Green Paper, and I hope that everyone with an interest in this subject will get involved either constituency by grouping them all together.

On the funding gap, as the hon. Lady is well aware, we have made £9.25 billion available to local authorities to meet their needs over three years. The reality is that if we are to tackle social care in this country so that everyone gets the care they need as they come to the residential care and into work in the community, and that brings a separate set of challenges. That work will go on in parallel, but the work on the Green Paper will look at the common issues as well as at the specific area of care for the elderly. I hope that gives her some reassurance. We cannot look at this in a silo—[Interruption.]

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The House of Lords Select Committee on the Long-term Sustainability of the NHS rapidly concluded that it would be impossible to carry out its task without investigating the interrelated nature of social care, and it changed its remit accordingly. The Committee changed the scope of its inquiry because it recognised that we will not see a long-term, sustainable solution unless we address both. I am afraid that a Green Paper that focuses entirely on social care will fail to rise to the challenge. Has the Minister read the Committee’s findings, and as she listens to those who consults at an early stage, will she be prepared, if the advice from them is to consider health and social care together—that has been the advice of all the commissions that have looked at this—to go back to the drawing board and start again by looking at both health and social care?

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): The House of Lords Select Committee on the Long-term Sustainability of the NHS rapidly concluded that it would be impossible to carry out its task without investigating the interrelated nature of social care, and it changed its remit accordingly. The Committee changed the scope of its inquiry because it recognised that we will not see a long-term, sustainable solution unless we address both. I am afraid that a Green Paper that focuses entirely on social care will fail to rise to the challenge. Has the Minister read the Committee’s findings, and as she listens to those who consults at an early stage, will she be prepared, if the advice from them is to consider health and social care together—that has been the advice of all the commissions that have looked at this—to go back to the drawing board and start again by looking at both health and social care?

Jackie Doyle-Price: To reassure my hon. Friend on the terms of reference for the Green Paper, let me say that part and parcel of getting a long-term, sustainable solution very much involves looking at care, and I pointed out in the statement that we need to look at holistic areas of policy to deliver it. Housing is one area, because if we get housing conditions right, we can obviously enable people to live for longer. The whole purpose of having a Green Paper and a debate is to make sure that we consider this issue not in a silo, but holistically, with a person-centred approach.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I thank the Minister for advance sight of the statement. I very much hope that we will not regularly have an Opposition day debate that is followed, months down the line, by the Government deciding to sneak in a statement on a Thursday morning, but this is perhaps a one-off.

If we are to have a consultation, we should start to look seriously at some of the challenges that we face with an ageing population. The Government currently have their head in the sand when it comes to who will actually look after these people when we restrict freedom of movement. The Government’s antics on social care have been far from the strength and stability that was talked about at the beginning the 2017 election campaign.

I very much welcome what has been said today about the cap, but I want to press the Minister about a point on which there is cross-party consensus in Scotland; in particular, it has the support of the Conservative party. In Scotland, the Scottish Government are extending free personal care to under-65s—under the so-called Frank’s law—on which her colleague Miles Briggs MSP has been working very hard. That will benefit about 9,000 people, but the UK Government have no intention of bringing in such a policy. Will she agree to meet me and colleagues from Scotland to look at this on a cross-party basis?

Jackie Doyle-Price: The whole purpose of a Green Paper is to allow us properly to debate and challenge all options available. I am interested in what has happened in Scotland. The hon. Gentleman says that personal care is met by the Government there, but the lion’s share of costs for the elderly is of course the residential component, which is not met by the Scottish Government. We need to make sure that we are learning from the experience of everybody not only in these four nations, but across the world.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I appreciate the importance the Government attach to adult social care, but the title of this statement is “Social Care” and, as the Minister knows, I have a strong interest in children’s social care. At a time when the number of children coming into care continues to rise, the thresholds for intervention are rising and preventive work is I fear going south. As the number of adoptions has also diminished, will she and the Government reassure me that they attach the same importance to dealing with the challenges faced by children’s social care services up and down the country at the current time?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I absolutely give my hon. Friend that assurance. If I may, I will suggest to my hon. Friends in the Department for Education that they respond to him on those points.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): May I say how nice it is to see my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) back in her rightful place on the Front Bench? I endorse what the Chair of the Health Committee, the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), has said to the Minister. Does the Minister regret that the Chancellor failed to mention social care at all in the Budget?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I think we are in danger of getting into a false debate. When I talk about social care, I do
not talk about it to the exclusion of health but automatically include it. When people talk about the failure of the Chancellor to mention social care, the reality is that more money was made available to the NHS, which will benefit the social care system.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): In the absence of any provision I may make—Dilnot might have encouraged me to make such provision—is it reasonable for me to expect my social care costs to be paid for by the state while my heirs inherit my substantial housing assets?

Jackie Doyle-Price: In a nutshell, my right hon. Friend has neatly summarised one of the debates we need to have in this area, which is how we can ensure that people obtain care when they need it and have it paid for, while at the same time achieving intergenerational fairness. I hope he engages fully in the debate on the Green Paper when it comes out. That is exactly that kind of thing we need to discuss to inform the public about how to plan for their long-term care needs.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): The leader of Rochdale Borough Council says that he needs about £20 million to meet growing demands on the adult care service. Given that social care was not mentioned in the Budget, will the Minister give the leader of my council some advice about where to find that £20 million?

Jackie Doyle-Price: As the hon. Lady knows, we have made an additional £9.25 billion available to local authorities, and they are now able to raise more through the social care precept. Some local authorities are very creative and imaginative in how they tackle that need, and we have increased the money available through the disabled facilities grant. That is taking a lot of demand out of the system, not least because it enables people to live independently at home without the need for care support, because of the extent to which it reduces falls. I encourage the hon. Lady to look not just at money, but at what else local authorities can do better.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I welcome the report and the focus on carers and the elderly—that is really important in Somerset. Let us not forget that four out of five social care institutions already offer good and outstanding service. As the Minister said, this is not just about funding: it is also about other measures that can be introduced to help. For example, hospitals such as Musgrove Park in my constituency link up with social care providers. It is doing a great job, and its outcomes for many people.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for her statement, and I encourage her—as others have done—to engage with the whole House on an issue that so many Members care deeply about. As the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) said, it is important to recognise the crises that exist now in certain areas of the country. We must engage for the long-term on a cross-party basis, but also on the crises now, including in my county of Staffordshire.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I do not disagree with much of what my hon. Friend says. Colleagues are talking about a crisis, but local authorities and the care sector have been put under a lot of pressure this year getting ready for winter, and they have stepped up to the plate. I pay tribute to everybody who works in that sector. They work incredibly hard and with real care. The work they do is not putting us in crisis but delivering great care outcomes for many people.

Karim Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): This is a shocking statement for thousands of families who live in this country with the misery of social care. The Minister referred to the previous Government, but the 2015 Conservative party manifesto was clear about what it was seeking to do, and about introducing a cap on care costs in 2016. A few weeks into office, the Government changed that, and moved the cap forward until 2020. I have written to the Minister about her exchanges in the House on 25 October with the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), during which she inadvertently misled Parliament about the 2020 date and legislation—that was subsequently changed when I went to the Library. The key issue is that this issue is causing silent misery for thousands of people now. I am 53. Will my children be suffering the same level of misery about my care costs in the next 30 years? When will we see the actual date published?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I think we made it clear in the recent general election that we will be revisiting this
issue. The hon. Lady wants certainty about how we fund the care system in future, and on what obligations individuals and their families will or will not have. It is therefore important to have that full public debate, and work together to bring forward proposals that will put our long-term care system on a sustainable footing. In the absence of that we will not achieve any resolution, and that is contributing to misery for people who do not currently have a limit on their overall care costs. That is what we are trying to address through this process.

[Interruption.] I hear noise from Labour Members about needing cross-party consensus, then I look at the behaviour of those on the Front Bench—lacking.

Jackie Doyle-Price: Absolutely. My hon. Friend mentions the expert panel, and it is important that we take the advice of those who have front-end experience of the sector. As he says, this is not just about money; it is about quality and getting the right blend of packages of support and help. We really need to think about achieving the best possible care for individuals, as well as how that care is paid for.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): A recent Barnardo’s report showed that two thirds of child carers start caring in primary school, some as young as four, with long-term damage to their mental and emotional health. Will the Minister ensure that one of the Government’s primary responsibilities is to tackle the issue of child carers and take them out of a responsibility that we really should not be placing upon them?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I thank the hon. Lady for those comments. She highlights what is literally the Cinderella in this debate. It is appalling that so many children are acting as carers, stoically and fantastically but, as she says, to their long-term detriment. As a society, we would be failing if we did not do more to support them.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): The fact that we need to tackle the challenge of social care has cross-party support and agreement. It was in the manifestos of both main parties. In fact, the Labour party’s manifesto said that it wanted to implement change through “consensus” and that the issue transcended party politics. Would the Minister welcome a cross-party approach, rather than political point scoring?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I am very keen to approach this matter through consensus. To be frank, I do not think that we can deliver change without consensus. We have written to all-party groups in the first instance to engage with them. Over the course of the next six months, I hope to engage in conversations and discussions with Members from all parts of the House.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): Of course, there is a short-term series of pressures. The Minister has cited the CQC’s state of social care report, which talks about decreasing numbers of beds in nursing homes and contracts being handed back to local authorities because of the acute financial pressure. She has also recognised that there is a longer-term issue that all Members have alluded to—the need to set aside some of the yah-boo party politicking and find a cross-party way forward. The hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) and my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) wrote to the Prime Minister saying, “Let’s have a convention across all the parties on social care reform.” Please will the Minister talk again to the Prime Minister? Let us do that, because it is the only way that we will really crack through this problem.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I welcome the spirit in which the hon. Gentleman makes his comments. It is fair to say...
that we are hearing exactly the same sort of plea from local authorities, which are at the front end of dealing with this problem. He is absolutely right that we need to separate the short-term pressures from the long term, and we ought to be able to have a more sensible conversation on the long-term pressures. Yes, let us save the politics for the short term and have consensus for the long term.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): I appreciate the opportunity to speak, Mr Deputy Speaker, as I missed the beginning of the Minister’s statement—my apologies. I concur totally with what a number of colleagues have said about the issues in the here and now. At the minute, there are significant issues for a lot of councils and a lot of care homes that cannot wait for a few years. The here and now must therefore be the priority.

I have two points to make on that. The first is negative and I would like the Minister to take it back to the Chancellor. I call on the Government to make a public commitment to fund the back-pay bill for sleep-in carers. I do not know how many colleagues know about this issue, but if it is not sorted very soon, a number of very reputable charities and organisations are likely to go bust. On a positive note, I wonder whether the Minister has read the recent BMJ report that indicated how exercise can be a significant miracle cure for older people. May I meet the Minister to share the report with her?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I would be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman; I am always looking for solutions. He is absolutely right that if we can look after our own wellbeing—both physical and mental—more effectively, the need for care will diminish. That is another reason why we need to have this public debate. Like the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey), the hon. Gentleman has mentioned sleep-ins. It is a big issue, but we are working closely with the sector to make sure that we can address it.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I am currently caring for my 80-year-old mum who has dementia and lives on her own many hundreds of miles away from me. I pay tribute to the fantastic support she receives from the Cumbria services—it is excellent and it reassures me, when I am standing here, that she is being looked after.

My experience of door-knocking during the election demonstrated strongly that the public do not understand this issue. Dementia patients in particular are not able to understand how care can be funded. When I spoke to people from the Alzheimer’s Society in Redditch, they welcomed the focus in our manifesto on this difficult issue. Will the Minister also comment on the fact that countries across the world face a similar challenge? This is really not about who is in power or in government; it is a feature of ageing societies. That is why we must look at it in the round.

Jackie Doyle-Price: My hon. Friend is right. I mentioned that local authorities are very keen for us to find a solution to this problem, but it is the Alzheimer’s lobby that is keener than anyone. At the moment, one in 10 people faces long-term care bills. Therefore, if we are looking at an individual’s risk, making financial provision is not necessarily something that they will do, so we do need a solution. The one in 10 people who face long-term care costs generally do face them as a consequence of dementia and the costs are very significant. That is exactly what we are trying to tackle by introducing a cap on the overall costs. That is why it is important that we all get involved and why the Alzheimer’s lobby is so keen that we establish cross-party consensus.

My hon. Friend raises an interesting point. The fact is that over the past 50 years, our lifestyles have changed significantly. Looking at my family, everybody lives within half a mile of each other, so as we get older it is very easy for the family to pick up caring responsibilities and share them about. I live 300 miles away from them. That is increasingly the pattern. Like her, when I knocked on doors during the election, I saw people in their late 80s whose families were living many miles away. That is something that we have failed to address over decades, and we need to address it now.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Will the Minister update us on the financial stability of the Four Seasons group, which cares for over 17,000 vulnerable residents across the UK?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I am aware that there has been considerable press reporting on what is happening with Four Seasons. What I can say is that since Southern Cross, the CQC has been involved in market oversight and in stress testing exactly what is happening. We are satisfied that there is no risk to any of the people who currently experience care through Four Seasons. Beyond that, I cannot say very much because there are obviously commercial issues. However, the hon. Gentleman is right to raise the matter and I hope I can reassure him that the CQC is very close to what is happening there.
12.36 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. On 13 September, this House unanimously passed a motion to revoke the Higher Education (Higher Amount) (England) Regulations 2016 and the Higher Education (Basic Amount) (England) Regulations 2016, which imposed the Government’s latest hike in tuition fees. The Government have refused to give effect to the will of the House, but the Leader of the House promised under her new convention that we would get a statement within 12 weeks.

Late yesterday—the final day of the 12 weeks—we got a written statement. It added almost nothing new and left us none the wiser on the Government’s promised review of higher education funding. It did, however, confirm that the Government will continue to ignore the clear will of this House and our conventions that allow Parliament a say on secondary legislation.

Mr Deputy Speaker, will you tell us your understanding of the so-called Leadsom convention? A written statement makes it near impossible to question Ministers. Has the Leader of the House given you any indication of when we would get a statement within 12 weeks.

The Government are riding roughshod over the democratic will of this House. How can we ensure that this House is respected?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I think we have heard enough today, have we not? Thank you.

I thank the hon. Lady for giving me notice of the point of order. She asked quite a few things. The first point is that I have been given no such notice by Ministers.

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation made a detailed written statement on the matter yesterday, as the hon. Lady said, following the understanding of the Leader of the House of 26 October. If the hon. Lady finds that unsatisfactory, which obviously she does, there are various avenues open to her, the most immediate of which is Education questions on Monday.

I am sure it is already apparent to her that that is a good place to start.

On the operation of the Leader of the House’s new convention, as a senior Front Bencher, the hon. Lady may wish to pursue the matter through the usual channels. I hope that the usual channels will be open to trying to ensure that she gets the answer. If not—I know that she is not a shy, retiring northerner like myself—I am sure that she could go directly to having a meeting with the Leader of the House to take the matter forward.

12.39 pm

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House takes note of the Justice Committee’s Twelfth and Fourteenth Reports of Session 2016-17, on Prison reform and the Government Responses to them; notes with concern the continuing crisis in prisons in England and Wales, with an historically high prison population and unacceptably high levels of violence, drug availability and use, disturbances and self-harm and self-inflicted deaths in the adult and youth custodial estate; further notes the critical reports by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons on individual establishments and thematic issues; welcomes the Government’s intention to proceed with a programme of prison reform and to produce a prison safety and reform action plan as recommended by the Committee, and the publication of performance data on each prison from 26 October 2017; regrets the fact that the Government does not intend to bring forward legislation to establish a statutory purpose for prisons, enhance the powers of HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, and place the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (PPO) and the UK’s National Preventive Mechanism on a statutory basis; further regrets the Government’s rejection of the Committee’s recommendation that it should report at six-monthly intervals on the impact of governor empowerment on complaints made to the PPO and Independent Monitoring Boards; and calls on the Government to ensure that information on prison performance and safety is published regularly, and with sufficient detail and timeliness to enable the effective scrutiny of the management of prisons by the Ministry of Justice and HM Prison and Probation Service.

Let me begin by thanking the Backbench Business Committee for giving us the opportunity to debate this very important topic. I thank the co-sponsor of the motion, the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson), and other members of the Justice Committee from both sides of the House who have contributed to our work over the last two years or more, both in this Parliament and in the previous one. I thank the many organisations involved in prison reform and other prison issues that have assisted us with their advice and experience. I also thank officials in Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service, and many prison officers across the country, for their co-operation. They all deserve our thanks.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Robert Neill: I will, but I hope that the hon. Lady will bear in mind that I should like to make a bit of progress.

Mrs Moon: Did the hon. Gentleman visit Parc prison during the Committee’s investigation? Its fantastic work with Invisible Walls Wales is making a huge difference
to people's attitudes to prison, as it shows that prison can change the lives of prisoners and their families, and prevent reoffending.

Robert Neill: We regularly visit a number of prisons. We are indeed aware of the very good work done at Parc, and we will continue our visits.

Let me explain why we tabled the motion and did so in these terms. We cannot avoid the reality that our prison system has reached a stage at which we have to use the phrase “a crisis”. I do not do so lightly. More than 30 years’ experience of practising criminal law and visiting prisons to advise prisoners, and subsequently, since coming to the House, working with the criminal justice sector, have led me inevitably to the conclusion that the system is under unprecedented strain.

I do not for one second doubt the good intentions of the Minister or his predecessors, the Secretary of State or his predecessors, or the management of Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service. I also acknowledge the good work that we see carried out by many individual members of that service as we travel around the country. However, the fact is that despite the extra money that has been invested in the system over the past year or so following one of our reports, and despite all that good work, all the indicators were going in the wrong direction at the time of our two reports—one on prison safety and one on governor empowerment and reform, which were produced in the 2015-16 and 2016-17 Sessions respectively—and they are still going in the wrong direction.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman—

Robert Neill: I fear not.

Hon. Members: Not yet!

Norman Lamb: Not yet, although the hon. Gentleman clearly deserves it. I am grateful to him for giving way.

I agree with the point that the hon. Gentleman is making, but is not the truth that we simply incarcerate too many people, particularly people with mental health problems? A staggering percentage of people in Britain have mental health problems, learning disabilities or autism. Should we not be investing more in keeping people out of prison and ensuring that they receive the treatment that they need to help them to avoid the criminal justice system in the longer run?

Robert Neill: The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point—I agree with him. Although the two reports that gave rise to the debate do not touch on this directly, he may be pleased to know that our Committee has agreed to embark on an inquiry in which we shall examine projections for the prison population up to 2025. The issue that he raises will prove to be a particularly important aspect of that inquiry.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that literacy levels among prisoners are a problem? I understand that more than 30% of people in prison have the reading age of an 11-year-old. Does not that issue really need to be addressed?

Robert Neill: My right hon. Friend is absolutely correct. The former Justice Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), rightly drew attention to that on a number of occasions. If we do not turn our prisons into places of education, we will be failing, and we will continue to see reoffending.

Part of the problem is the low attainment of people when they arrive in prisons, which is often linked with issues such as social deprivation, a lack of proper parenting and unstable family backgrounds. A particularly high percentage of prisoners have been in care. Low educational attainment is a real problem, and it needs to be tackled.

One of the problems that we have found is that because of other pressures on the system, many establishments are running regimes that are so restricted that it is virtually impossible for prisoners—even those who are well motivated and wish to do so—to gain access to some of the educational facilities that ought to be available. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend (Sir Greg Knight) for that important point.

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that prison can offer people a second chance to gain access to education and to find the right track? Charities such as Greener Growth, which works in Norfolk prisons in particular, and with which I work in my constituency, help people to understand and connect with the environment, and to learn about food and nutrition, as well as many of the other basics in life that most of us take for granted.

Robert Neill: That is absolutely true. I and the Committee recognise the very good work that is being done. What we must do, however, is to ensure that we have a programme of prison reform that genuinely enables us to draw that good work together, and establishes a comprehensive and holistic strategy. For example, the good that is done by many people on existing programmes ought to be reinforced by a more imaginative use of release on temporary licence, but sadly there has been a decrease of some 40% in the use of such release over the last couple of decades. That is one of the indicators that are going in the wrong direction.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): If we could engage many more outside bodies—local authorities and experts on health and education, for instance, and indeed experts on the environment such as the Wildlife Trust, all of which run many good programmes on rehabilitation—we could not only save money by setting up the right framework, but benefit offenders, as the courses would give them skills and make them feel confident about going into the outside world.

Robert Neill: My hon. Friend is right. I cannot do better than quote a 19th-century prison reformer, Thomas Mott Osborne, a former politician who is described by my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath as having “turned to good works”. That might seem to be a tautology. Osborne became immersed in the prison system, becoming a prison reform commissioner in New York just before the first world war. He said:

"Not until we think of our prisons as in reality educational institutions shall we come within sight of a successful system; and by a successful system I mean, one that not only ensures a quiet,
orderly, well-behaved prison but has genuine life in it— one that restores to society the largest number of intelligent, forceful, honest citizens.”

He was right then, and I think that what he said rings true now as well.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): I was recently very glad to speak to a group of sixth-formers who were doing modern studies. They asked me about prisons, and I said that at the first opportunity I would raise the subject on the Floor of the House and ask one of their questions. Given that my hon. Friend is so well versed in the subject, I will ask him this question: “Do you think that the support on offer to those prisoners who suffer mental health disorders is effective?”

Robert Neill: All the evidence that our Committee has seen so far suggests that it is not effective. Far too many people in prison suffer from mental health difficulties. David Cameron, the former Prime Minister, rightly emphasised that in a speech that he made back in 2015.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): In February.


The point was well made. There are some people whom we will always have to imprison, because they deserve to go to prison, and I saw enough of them during my career as a barrister practising criminal law. However, many others are in prison due to far more complex reasons, such as bad choices, lack of support, lack of background, poor education and mental health issues. We need to be much more discerning, and that means that we need a much more sophisticated approach to our penal policy. We need to introduce genuinely robust alternatives to custody, in the right cases, for those who do not pose a threat and a danger to the public, and who can be reformed without their going to prison.

That is critical. We have not yet achieved that. The objective must be not only that the public have confidence in sentences, but that we have proper systems for the rehabilitation of those who are incarcerated. However, as almost everyone will be released at some point, we need to introduce genuinely robust alternatives to custody, in the right cases, for those who do not pose a threat and a danger to the public, and who can be reformed without their going to prison.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman rightly emphasises the importance of education and rehabilitation, but may I add to that the critical aspect of access to family? May I also commend to him the report on mental health in prisons by the Joint Committee on Human Rights, and the work that we did in particular to look at the risks to young people and offenders with mental health problems? Such people were not always guaranteed access to family support at critical times when they were self-harming or at risk of suicide?

Robert Neill: That is a good point. I know that other Members are likely to take up such issues in our debate.

While we welcome a number of the initiatives the Government have implemented, more still needs to be done. We particularly regret the loss of the prison element of the Prisons and Courts Bill from the last Parliament, because implementing that statutory purpose, which would have covered rehabilitation for prisoners, would have been an important umbrella under which to link the good work that is done. It is good news that we have a proper prison reform and safety plan, but it needs to be put into a full context. We need positive actions, not just the good aspirations that are set out.

It is essential that there is a genuinely independent and robust inspectorate, so it is regrettable that we have so far lost the opportunity to place on a statutory basis not just the chief inspector of prisons, but the whole inspectorate as an institution, and to strengthen the requirement for his recommendations to be complied with. It is scandalous that at present only a minority of his recommendations in some cases are taken up. That needs to change. It is also regrettable that the prisons and probation ombudsman has not yet been placed on a statutory basis. I hope we will find a legislative opportunity to do so. I believe that that is what the Minister wants to do, but we must not lose it from the agenda.

Our present indicators on safety in relation to self-harm, suicides, prisoner-on-prisoner assaults and assaults on staff continue to go in the wrong direction. More prison officers have been put in, but we must look in the round, too, at how many people we are sending to prison and why, and what sort of regimes are in place.

We have heard reference to an action plan on prison safety and reform, and what we hope to see are specific strategies on employment, mental health, women in prison, and the retention and recruitment of officers, because keeping experienced officers is particularly important. We need a proper robust inspection mechanism under which the inspectorate, which includes excellent people, has genuine teeth to do what is necessary. We also need more transparency, and I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) will talk about transparency and data.

It is not acceptable that of the 29 local prisons and training prisons inspected this year, 21 were judged to be poor or not sufficiently good. I know that the Minister agrees that we have to turn that around, but all too often I have found a culture of defensiveness among some of the senior management in Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service. We must use the changes that have been made to the structure of the service to refresh that culture at every level. That is a most pressing matter. Great work is done further down, but all too often prison officers and governors have said to us that they feel cut out from what can still be too hierarchical a chain of command. That needs to change.

Prison reform was rightly described by David Cameron as a “great progressive cause”, and so it should be, for politicians on both sides of the political divide. Let me end with this thought. A former Home Secretary who became Prime Minister said that one of the purposes of prison was to seek the treasure in the heart of every man. That was said by Winston Churchill in 1910. I say to the current Prime Minister that, as she has had the same career trajectory, such a phrase would fit very well with her desire to tackle burning injustices in society. Some of the injustices and challenges are as acute in our prisons as anywhere else. This is a great cause, and we hope that we will have some more specific responses from the Minister to our reports, and a further indication of the direction of travel. Above all, I hope the House will not let this issue slide down the agenda.

Several hon. Members rose—
Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I should say that there is a time limit on speeches of five minutes.

12.55 pm

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Starting from now, Mr Deputy Speaker.

This is a particularly hard-hitting motion; it does not draw back from the challenges the Prison Service faces. It is important that today Select Committee members focus on specific issues and ask the Minister for the Government’s response to the major challenges, and we will do that. As the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), the very good Chair of the Justice Committee, said, the situation is deteriorating; the problems in prisons are getting worse.

While staff are doing an excellent job and trying their best in difficult circumstances, there have been 300 deaths in prison custody in the past 12 months, of which 77 were self-inflicted deaths. Self-harm has reached a record high and increased by 12% over that period, and the number of incidents requiring hospital attendance rose by 9%. Meanwhile, prisoner-on-prisoner assaults have risen to record highs, and the numbers of assaults on staff and of hospital admissions continue to rise, so there is a real challenge in the system.

I contend that there is a challenge because of reductions in resources and staff numbers, but there is also a challenge because of an increase in the amount of psychoactive substances and drugs getting into prison. It is a difficult job and a challenge to tackle, but if we do not get the basics right in our prison system, the aims of reform, rehabilitation and turning positive individuals back into society will be hampered.

I want to see the re-establishment of the dog units, not just as the regionalised resource that they are now, but as a resource that can be allocated locally.

The Minister must look at introducing planned searches of prisoners in prisons. He must also look at whether there should be searches of prison officers and delivery staff. I spoke this week to prison officers who said they would welcome that because they want to weed out corruption among staff. I want the Minister to tell us how that will be undertaken generally. I also want the Minister to take further steps to ensure that all category C prisons have netting around them, to stop people throwing drugs and other things into prisons.

We must look at the criminal gangs inside and outside prisons who are making money out of the delivery of drugs into prisons by many means. What I do not get from the Government is what their overall strategy is, and I think that feeling is shared by external agencies such as Her Majesty’s inspectorate of prisons. I see a number of individual measures, but I do not get the overall strategy. Will the Minister also tell me what is happening with reform prisons? We had a report this week about Holme House prison, which showed that every indicator was going in the wrong direction. It showed more drug use, more self-harm and more attacks on staff—and that is in a reform prison. We need to know who is accountable for that, and what plans are in place to drive improvements in that prison.

Time is extremely pressing, so I shall just ask the Minister one more question. When the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee), appeared before the Justice Committee recently, I asked whether the Oakhill training centre was now performing to a contractual level with which he was satisfied, and he replied, “Currently, they are.” Since that discussion, a report on Oakhill has shown that, yet again, that establishment is not performing to the required standard. Will the Minister tell me what concrete steps are being taken to improve performance at Oakhill? If the improvements that have been set out are not made, will he seek to remove the contract from G4S, as has happened elsewhere?

1.1 pm

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) and the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson), and indeed to work with them on the Justice Committee. I apologise to the House that I will not be here for the wind-ups. I have already apologised to the Minister and to you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I might be here in body at the moment, but my heart is currently in court 47 of the High Court, where my district council and our brilliant campaigning group are bringing a judicial review against our clinical commissioning group for its failure to consult us properly on changes to our local hospital. I will be whizzing along there immediately after I have spoken today. Nothing else could stop me talking about prisons, as colleagues in the House well know.

I realised during my time in the judicial review yesterday how much I, as a former civil servant, cared about evidence and good government. That is why I shall focus on the importance of data provision today. I am disappointed that the Prisons and Courts Bill did not make it into this parliamentary Session, but I accept
that many of the changes envisaged by the Minister do not require legislation and can be taken forward in other ways. However, those changes must be driven by reliable, person-centred data. During my two and a half years on the Justice Committee, we have asked successive Ministers for up-to-date information on prison safety indicators such as incidents of disorder, staffing levels and activity levels, including the number of hours each day prisoners spend locked in their cells. Our efforts have resulted in better-quality data on recruitment and retention, but we have struggled to scrutinise the Government’s efforts to improve the overall situation because we have not received all the information we need.

The Secretary of State delivered welcome news when he appeared in front of the Committee in October and told us about the justice data hub, which went live the following day. I encourage hon. Members to look up the data hub on the Ministry of Justice website—though possibly not during the debate. It holds information ranging from prisoners’ perceptions of safety to accredited programme completions and deaths in custody. I am far from techie myself, but I have tried the hub out and found it quite easy to use. It is definitely a step in the right direction, but much of the information on it is based on annual statistical releases. If we are truly committed to reform in our prisons, we need more data that really drills down on specifics. We need to know how much time prisoners are spending locked in their cells on a daily basis, and to be able to work out whether the funding given to the most under-pressure prisons has actually had an impact.

I am in regular contact with Ian Blakeman, the governor of HMP Bullingdon in my constituency. He was very understanding when I had to postpone our meeting, which had been scheduled for this afternoon, so that I could speak in this debate. The prison recently underwent an inspection and areas of improvement were identified, but without comparative performance data and without knowing where he stands in comparison to other prisons, it is difficult for the governor to feel genuinely empowered to achieve the better outcomes we are all looking for.

We must also know more about what our prisoners are doing once they have completed their sentences. The online hub tells us how prepared prisoners feel on release, but nothing more about those who find housing or employment after they have left prison. We know that there are some fantastic organisations working hard to prepare prisoners for their release, including the Clink restaurant and the Langley House Trust, which provides specialist housing, programmes and support services in the community for people seeking to live crime-free. Just 2.6% of people in the trust’s housing are reconvicted, which is one of the lowest rates in the country.

**Ms Buck: The borough of Westminster has the highest incidence of rough sleeping in the country. Does the hon. Lady share my concern that those involved in Westminster Council’s rough sleeping strategy have found that one in three rough sleepers have been released from prison? We have to make finding a stable and secure home central to the issue of prisoner release.**

**Victoria Prentis: I could not agree more with the hon. Lady. Housing is absolutely key to the proper rehabilitation of offenders. I do not think I would be breaching any confidences by saying that the Justice Committee will be working with other Select Committees to ensure that we fully cover the issues relating to housing in the coming parliamentary Session.**

The Kainos Community transforms lives through the Challenge to Change programme, which includes post-release mentoring. To break the cycle of reoffending, we must have more data to target projects like these where they are most needed and most effective. Becoming a data-driven Department is a laudable ambition, but it is vital that the statistics we are given do more than scratch the surface. Prison management and the provision of safe and decent prison conditions that promote rehabilitation are complex tasks. They must be well grounded in evidence. Finding solutions to the problems our prisons are facing requires us to delve much deeper than we have yet done. In conclusion, off I go to court to deal with the way in which good government is run, but I ask all hon. Members to remember that, when considering prisons, data really matters.

1.7 pm

**Ellie Reeves** (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): It gives me great pleasure, as a newly elected member of the Justice Committee, to speak in today’s debate. Last Thursday, members of the Committee visited HMP Rochester. Rochester holds 740 prisoners and conditions in that Victorian prison have been described as deplorable by the independent monitoring board. In March 2017, the Government announced that the prison would be closed and replaced, but in October 2017 that was put on hold. Many of the facilities at HMP Rochester are in a state of disrepair. For instance, the classroom in which rehabilitation lessons take place has a leaking roof.

**Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): On that point, and the point made a few moments ago about data, it is extremely important to have adequate data if we are to provide education and training. The Prisoners Education Trust and the Ministry of Justice have both reported that reoffending goes down by an average of five percentage points if education can be provided.

**Ellie Reeves**: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, and I agree that education is absolutely at the heart of the rehabilitation of offenders.

At Rochester, when it rains, lessons have to be cancelled because the roof leaks. These issues have to be addressed urgently if we are to reform our prisons and improve standards. Visiting cells there, we saw prisoners in cramped and unsanitary conditions. One cell that housed three men had a toilet that was screened by little more than plastic sheeting and had no toilet lid. In addition, the perimeter fence is low and not comprehensively covered by CCTV. This has led to drugs, particularly Spice and other psychoactive substances, frequently being thrown over the fence, with 47 drug-related incidents recorded in just one week. We were told it would cost £300,000 to install a fit-for-purpose CCTV system and that the benefits would be immeasurable. We also visited the drug rehabilitation wing, but the 12-step rehabilitation programme had to stop when the prison received its now rescinded closure notice. These are the conditions that the governor and staff at HMP Rochester are battling daily and I commend them for their work.
One of the key factors in rehabilitation and safety in our prisons is the prison population. It has been fluctuating around the 85,000 mark for nearly a decade and as of this month stands at 86,000. The Government have been asked repeatedly why the numbers continue to grow, and their answers usually follow the template that more people are convicted of sex-related offences and are serving longer sentences. Although that may be the case in part, we must also look at the wider picture to understand fully why our prison population continues to rise. We cannot look at offences and sentence length alone to answer this question.

Long-term cuts to mental health services, addiction support and housing have all played a part and had an impact on our prison population through reoffending rates. The Ministry of Justice's latest figures show that 29.6% of offenders in the October to December 2015 cohort reoffended within a year. Cuts mean less support when these individuals require more than most. The Howard League's "No Fixed Abode" study from 2016 estimated that a third of released prisoners have no accommodation to go to on leaving prison. The Combined Homelessness and Information Network's annual report on rough sleeping in London showed that 33% of people seen sleeping rough had some experience of being in prison. Let me repeat that; a third of all prisoners are likely to be homeless on release.

Jo Churchill: Does the hon. Lady agree that this relates to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) about not being able to keep the data? It is well known that health outcomes for those who sleep rough are less good, and we find ourselves with a never-ending cycle of people bouncing between the street and prison, and in and out of the system, with little care and attention to find, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) said, the treasure in man's soul.

Ellie Reeves: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. One issue that has been raised with us is that people are imprisoned for short sentences of two or three months, and during that time there is no chance of any rehabilitation. We need to look more closely at community-based sentencing, so that people can get rehabilitation and come out of the cycle of prison and homelessness. That is an important point.

To reduce reoffending rates, we need to stop the spiral of prison services being eviscerated, leaving inmates with little help in their rehabilitation work. It is a commonly held view across the House that prison is not there merely to punish offenders, protect society and act as a deterrent; it must also exist to rehabilitate and re-educate. Those aims can ultimately reduce the risk of reoffending by providing services to inmates that will provide them with the necessary skills that mean that on their release from prison they will be best equipped to fit back into society and mitigate their chances of falling into a cycle of criminal behaviour.

When prisoners are incarcerated, the state is responsible for their wellbeing. We must not view this responsibility lightly; if we are to reduce crime and, in turn, our prisoner population, we must fix the wider problem pieces of this complex jigsaw. Departmental figures released last Friday show that our prison system is operating at close to maximum capacity. This is not sustainable and it is not a simple case of longer sentences for more serious crimes. We have a collective responsibility to ensure that the system in which these prisoners are treated is comprehensive in its ability to provide rehabilitation; only then will we see our prison population decline.

In conclusion, it is clear that multiple things must be addressed for us to secure decent and sustainable prison reforms and to ensure that the prison population is manageable and kept at a safe level. I have been able to draw attention to only a small number of concerns, and I hope Members will touch on other issues. Until the prison population is under control, I fear that reform and safety standards will suffer. Three people to a room in a Victorian-era prison with limited sanitation, derelict and dilapidated amenities, little or no rehabilitation work, and an uncertain future for “imprisonment for public protection” prisoners both inside and outside prison; this is not where we should be in a 21st-century justice system.

We have by no means the worst prison services in the world, but we could and should do better. I look forward to furthering those aims with my fellow Committee members in due course.

1.15 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I have three questions for the Minister. First, he has heard our concerns about the quality of the ageing estate and the living conditions of prisoners. What is he going to do about it? My second question relates to the status of the Government’s closure plans and the plans to update and replace our ageing prisons. What is he going to do about it? My third is about the impact of the uncertainty over closures on what the prisons are trying to do to update and improve their facilities.

To deal with my first question, the Minister will have seen, as we have, responses from the chief inspector of prisons. The Minister has heard from Members today that in many prisons they have seen the showers and lavatory facilities are filthy and dilapidated, and there are no credible or affordable plans for refurbishment. In a report published only a couple of months ago, the chief inspector of prisons said:

“prisoners are held in conditions that fall short of what most members of the public would consider as reasonable or decent”.

My question on what the Government are doing to address that is therefore very relevant.

On my second question, the Minister himself said only a couple of months ago that although his first priority is to ensure public protection and provide accommodation for all those sentenced by the courts, the commitment to close old prisons remains a viable option with which he wishes to continue. I would like to hear some detail about what is happening with that programme. The prison estate transformation programme reconfigured the estate into three functions looking after reception, training and resettlement, and those three are crucial to the better treatment of prisoners. The Ministry was also given £1.3 billion in 2015 as part of the spending review to invest over the next five years...
to transform the prison estates. What exactly is happening to that, what progress is being made and how is it being dealt with?

As for my third question, on the impact of the uncertainty about closure on prison performance and staff morale, I would echo the comments made by the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) about the visit to Rochester prison. I was unable to go on that visit myself, but it is crucial that the lessons from it are learned. One lesson was, as governors told the Committee, that the decision about investing in maintenance or improving the facilities had not gone ahead since the announcement that the prison would close. As we have heard, the old 1840s prison buildings there are described as “deplorable” and “deteriorating”. That has an impact on recruitment, which had been frozen in Rochester, and it proves demoralising to staff.

I think that those three questions are the most pertinent.

Robert Neill: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the Rochester issue. He might like to know that we found on one wing that some 22 showers had been out of operation for months. When we spoke to people there, they said that the nub of the problem was that the facilities management contractors do not see the governors as their client. They see their client relationship being with MOJ’s commercial arm. That needs to be got right, because it means that the efforts of governors get nowhere—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Can I be honest? We need shorter interventions. The hon. Gentleman was hoping to get two minutes at the end of the debate; he is eating into those two minutes, and he will understand if he does not get them.

John Howell: I fully accept the point raised by my hon. Friend for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), which goes back to what I said about the prison having given up on trying to invest any money in refurbishment or in replacing its ageing facilities. I have already quoted the chief inspector of prisons, who said that the shower and lavatory facilities in many prisons are filthy and dilapidated.

What will the Government do to address our concerns about the quality of the ageing estate? What are they doing about the current programme of reform and estate modernisation? What impact is the uncertainty about closures having both on the prisons themselves and on the lives of prisoners? Those are the three most relevant questions.

1.20 pm

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): The English prison system is in crisis. It is failing inmates, prison officers and, fundamentally, society, as the hard-hitting motion tabled by the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) and the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson) makes clear. Building more prison places will not solve the problem. The prison population tends to expand to fill the places available, often even before the places are built.

As the Howard League puts it, “trying to deal with only the supply of prison resources and prison places will not work. We now need to manage demand and, in the process, ask some fundamental questions about who we send to prison and why.”

It is therefore surprising that the UK Government are pursuing a strategy of building an industrial-scale prison complex in my nation.

With that in mind, I will focus on the UK Government’s decision to outsource the crisis in the English prison system to Wales, rather than fix it. On 27 February 2017, the Ministry of Justice opened the biggest prison in Europe in north Wales—HMP Berwyn. Once fully operational, the prison will have the capacity to hold more than 2,100 male prisoners. I am sure it will not be a revelation to many in this House that piling a few thousand prisoners into a small corner of north Wales is not expected to be conducive to rehabilitation. Whether it is the left-leaning Howard League or the Centre for Social Justice founded by the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), there is agreement that these prisons do not rehabilitate.

Even more galling, HMP Berwyn will not meet the demands of the nation in which it is being built. HMP Berwyn alone will have 800 more places than there are inmates in Wales. In March 2017, the UK Government announced plans to build a new super-prison in Baglan, Port Talbot. Yet again, this prison is not being built for our needs. It will be for 1,600 inmates shipped into Port Talbot. A person does not need a Fields medal to work out that adding the 800 surplus places at Berwyn to the 1,600 surplus places at the proposed Baglan prison would mean 2,400 more places than are required in Wales.

The truth of the matter is that Wales is England’s affordable penal colony. Westminster is turning old south Wales into a homage to 19th-century New South Wales. Those are not my words but the comments of Frances Crook, the chief executive officer of the Howard League. Ms Crook went as far as to draw a parallel between the infamous Botany Bay penal colony and Wales—a rather extreme but, none the less, fitting analogy.

Plaid Cymru has always been against the building of these monstrous prisons in Wales. Currently, however, the plans are being taken ahead with the Labour Welsh Government’s blessing. In fact, the Labour Welsh Government in Cardiff could stop the development if they so decided, because the proposed Baglan prison would be built on Welsh Government land, if only they would, for once, put the interests and requirements of Wales first.

Wales does not want or need another super-prison, much as it did not need the first. Because of the lack of distinct legal jurisdiction, Westminster can still impose prisons on Wales. Northern Ireland and Scotland are off limits thanks to their more generous devolution settlements, but not my country. The existing prison estate in Wales is far from perfect, but we need Welsh solutions to Welsh problems.

Welsh young offenders and women offenders are being sent over the border to England, a damning indictment of the policy currently applied to Wales. Devolution of the prison estate and the criminal justice system must be a priority for the sake of offenders, taxpayers and the communities afflicted by the UK Government’s super-prison policies.
Piling thousands of prisoners on top of each other in these titan prisons is not conducive to rehabilitation or safety, be it for those detained or for those doing the detaining. Relying on some modern-day digital panopticon for the safety and operation of our prisons is neither sensible nor appropriate. All the evidence shows that smaller, more human prisons that do not put economies of scale ahead of outcomes are what our prison estates need.

I close with a plea to the UK and Welsh Governments: listen to the 9,000 signatories to the petition against the Port Talbot prison; listen to the experts from every inch of the political spectrum who advise against these behemoth prisons; listen to the former inmates; listen to the residents; and listen to Wales. We will not become England’s penal colony.

1.25 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): There are three issues that could promote the progress of effective prison reform, all of which relate to improving prisoners’ contact with their families. As time is short, I will summarise those issues at the outset. First, there is a need to consider the appointment of a deputy director for families, mirroring the staffing priority given to drugs and violence in prisons. Secondly, there is a need to speed up the long-awaited policy announcement on the revised procedures for release on temporary licence. Thirdly, could Skype and other innovative face-to-face digital platforms be used to strengthen prisoners’ family ties?

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) for successfully championing the importance of good-quality family contact to prisoners and their rehabilitation when he was Prisons Minister. His leadership paved the way for the excellent Farmer review.

The need to replicate the good practice that exists across the prison estate in supporting prisoners’ family ties and to address inconsistencies in that area was one of the key messages of the Farmer review, “The Importance of Strengthening Prisoners’ Family Ties to Prevent Reoffending and Reduce Intergenerational Crime,” published earlier this year. I thank the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah) for his wholehearted commitment to implementing in full every one of the Farmer review’s 21 recommendations.

Another reason for the Farmer review so successfully gaining traction in government is that senior officials are personally committed to the families agenda, often because they have been No. 1 governors in prisons and have seen at first hand the difference made by good family contact. However, this important agenda cannot be dependent on an individual official’s conviction that it matters. Civil servants move on.

Indeed, Paul Baker, the most senior official working on the implementation of the Farmer review, is leaving at the end of the year. I pause here to acknowledge the decades of excellent service he has given to our Prison Service, his dogged pursuit of reform and his championing of prisoners’ families, who are among the most neglected and stigmatised people in this country.

Mr Baker currently heads that work alongside his responsibilities as deputy director of custody for London and Thames Valley, a large group of prisons. In other words, the families agenda is tagged on to a very demanding existing work load. Does the Minister agree that now would be the ideal time to give this agenda the same priority within the management structure of the prisons system as drugs and violence, each of which has a dedicated deputy director? If the importance of family and other relationships is to be the golden thread running through our prisons, we need senior staff who are mandated to keep the issue salient until it is embedded in the estate as firmly as action to combat drugs and violence. Indeed, family involvement drives improvements in those other areas.

Will the Minister kindly look at speeding up the development and announcement of the release on temporary licence policy? ROTL allows for the temporary release of prisoners, where it is safe to do so, to undertake purposeful activities that will benefit their resettlement, including rebuilding closer ties with their family. If men undertake parenting and other family learning courses, such as on how to be a responsible father, open conditions such as ROTL give them the opportunity to put theory into practice.

Exceptional negative incidents will always be reported, but the evidence showing high rates of compliance with ROTL terms and a consequential reduction in reoffending rates is positive. For example, an offender could attend parent-teacher evenings, as well as case conferences to discuss their child protection and care proceedings. This also helps families adjust to having the person around more. Many prisoners begin to feel less legitimate as a parent, which makes it difficult to build rounded relationships with their child, and ROTL would help boost their confidence as a parent. Indicators suggest that all forms of ROTL have fallen significantly since 2013. Governors have been waiting for guidance on this for more than a year and do need it now.

Finally, may I ask the Minister whether Skype or other face-to-face platforms could be used to aid prisoners’ family contact time, enabling digital visits to homes to see their family members in that context?

1.30 pm

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): First, I apologise to the House and to the Minister if I cannot be here for the wind-ups. I also commend the diligence of the Justice Committee for bringing this debate forward, as it is incredibly important that the House has a chance to focus on this issue of safety and reform. Lots of organisations in the wider community are also campaigning on these areas, and I particularly want to draw the House’s attention to the work of the Community trade union, the largest trade union in the private prisons sector. It has a strong set of recommendations and campaigns for a safer justice sector. I urge the Minister to look at the work Community is doing and its important recommendations. That would add to this issue.

I simply want to talk about Her Majesty’s prison Nottingham, which is in my constituency, where recently we have seen dramatically very difficult pressures starting to grow. We have had five deaths in custody since the summer, some of which have been suicide and on some
of which we have not yet had the coroner’s report and recommendations. It is therefore still early days in terms of knowing whether there is a common pattern of events in these cases. I have met the governor, Tom Wheatley, and spoken with the diligent independent monitoring board—these are volunteers who go in every week to check out things such as safety in the prison.

The biggest problem in the prison is the cycle of drugs and smuggling, be it of Spice or mamba, to which many hon. Members have alluded. These drugs are getting into the prison has to get national attention. Sometimes they are thrown over prison walls, but more often than not—it is difficult to be fully certain—there is a smuggling process whereby prisoners secrete drugs upon their person to bring them into jail. Some inmates are finding themselves affected by those psychoactive substances, but in a way it is just as bad that gang operations are going on within the prisons, as they are putting pressures on some offenders who go out on licence, halfway through their sentence. Incredibly, people are almost driven to reoffend, deliberately to break their licence, so that they can go back into prison in order to smuggle more drugs back in. It is an astonishing idea that in the 21st century there is reoffending as a way of making a living, but some prisoners are in that cycle.

I urge the Minister to think creatively about how to break that problem. There is a question of resources involved. A ridiculous number of experienced officers have been taken out in recent years. I know that things are stabilising now and that new officers are being recruited, but that experienced officer set is what we need to retain to ensure the situation does not get any worse.

I encourage the Minister to think about ways of breaking that cycle of people reoffending on licence, perhaps by getting the courts to randomise which prisons reoffenders are returned to. That might stop this notion that the prisoner breaking their licence knows they will be going back into a certain prison, such as Nottingham. If we can break that, we might be able to deal with this issue. I know that there are networks across other prisons, which are difficult to break, but we need creative solutions. It is important that the designated keyworker programme that has started in Nottingham is extended so that officers can get to know inmates a little more effectively. It is not just those on vulnerable watch who, sadly, we have seen taking their own lives. That is an important programme to be continued.

Also on communications, we need to make sure we regularise access to telephone calls for prisoners, because there is a smuggling problem in respect of mobile phones, too. If we got into a situation where we had regularised phone calls and access to approved family members, some of the pressures and strains on inmates could be lessened. We need creative solutions. Resources are part of this, but it is not just about them, which is why I am grateful to the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), the Chair of the Committee, for securing this important debate for the House to pay attention to today.

1.35 pm

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie), who talked about his experiences of his local prison, and I am pleased to be part of today’s debate. I believe there is general consensus in the Chamber about the fact that our prison system is not perfect, but I acknowledge that the Government have an ambitious programme for reform that will benefit not only offenders, but communities across the country. In particular, I welcome the 2,500 new prison officers who will be appointed and the provision of 5,600 body cameras, not just for prison officers, but for the police—that issue has been raised with me in particular.

I wish to focus my speech on gardening and the environment in the prison system, and I make no excuses for that, because it has a lot of potential to be helpful. We know that imprisoning somebody does not in itself reduce reoffending rates. As a number of Members have said, to do that we must try to give these people skills to increase their employability chances and help them to reintegrate back into the community. That is where environmental and gardening schemes can really help. As I have said before in the Chamber, many prisons are old and outdated, with little green space. There is definite data to show that when people are not in contact with green space and nature, it has a real impact on their mental health. I want to talk about a couple of good schemes that can show how this is useful.

The Eden Project has teamed up with Dartmoor prison to transform a disused exercise yard into a gardening project within the resettlement unit, from which local residents can buy vegetables, flowers and eggs. Such schemes are starting to crop up in many prisons across the country. When I was a television reporter, I went to Leyhill prison, near Bristol, which had a fabulous gardening project. It had state-of-the-art greenhouses and its gardening projects won gold medals at Chelsea. Lots of those projects need to be either reinstated—some have dropped away—or regenerated. The Conservation Foundation is about to start a “Gardening against the odds” project in Wandsworth prison. The project will extend across three exercise yards that are currently just tarmac, and will bring together prisoners, staff, members of the community, leading horticulturists and environmentalists.

Such schemes can stimulate mental and physical health. As I said, they also teach skills and disciplines that can improve employability. I recently met the British Association of Landscape Industries, which represents a £6 billion industry that is crying out for people to work for it, so there are opportunities if we can skill people up in these areas before they get back into the working world. Lots of these projects are not costly—they are cost-effective and highly beneficial—so I hope that the Minister will make reference to them. Earlier in the year, he replied to one of my oral questions by mentioning a prison gardening competition and inviting me to be a judge. I hope he is going to stick to the offer, because I would very much like to do that.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah): I confirm the invitation to my hon. Friend to be a judge in the prison gardening competition, at her convenience—the invitation is open.

Rebecca Pow: I thank the Minister for that. I am of course hoping that I will be allowed out by the Whips, as this is a very important initiative. Once it gets more attention, more people will enter the competition.
The Forestry Commission runs an interesting offenders and nature scheme, with offenders typically working as volunteers on nature conservation and woodland sites. They get out to do tasks such as building footpaths, creating boardwalks and establishing ponds, and learn about conservation and the environment. That, too, is very cost-effective, and at the same time it addresses several of the underlying factors that contribute to reoffending.

The Phoenix Futures recovery charity works with people, both in and out of prison, who struggle with drug and alcohol addiction. We have heard a lot about the drug problem in our prisons today. The charity is supported by the National Lottery, and it runs a recovery through nature programme, which aims to connect those who use the charity’s services with nature to assist their recovery. It has been shown that those who participate in the project have an incredible 41% higher chance of recovery than the national average, so I can tell the Minister that there is mileage in it.

Many of the ideas I have mentioned are included in a Conservative Environment Network pamphlet, to which many Members contributed, which calls for a more holistic and cross-departmental approach to environmental policy. This Government are doing great work on the environment and bringing it into many areas, but let us add an environmental strand to our prison reform.

I do not know how many Members have seen the film “Paddington 2”. Perhaps you have, Madam Deputy Speaker—[Interruption.] Oh, well you should see it; it is fantastic. Paddington used cooking to improve the lives of prisoners, and I am saying, “Let’s use gardening.”

We have a great opportunity. We need change. The situation is challenging. I am not saying that this is the answer to everything, but it is one small tool to add to the box—or the greenhouse—that might help us to address the problem. Ultimately, it will improve the lives of so many people who deserve it.

1.41 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Nelson Mandela said:

“It is said that no one truly knows a nation until one has been inside its jails. A nation should not be judged by how it treats its highest citizens, but its lowest ones.”

Those words should be at the forefront of our minds as we consider the ways in which prisons operate in England and Wales.

With £3.954 billion of annual expenditure, prisons take up the largest share of the Ministry of Justice’s budget. That goes towards maintaining the 118 adult prisons and keeping roughly 86,000 people in prison. According to 2015-16 figures, that works out at a staggering £32,510 per prisoner.

As a member of the Justice Committee, a week ago I made a very interesting visit to Cookham Wood young offenders institute and Medway secure training centre. I was heartened to see the education and training provided, but at the same time I was concerned to learn that, due to staffing levels, young people were not getting the 27 hours of education that they were supposed to get. Instead, they were receiving just half that amount.

In my view, that seriously hampers the rehabilitation of those young men and increases the chances of them reoffending.

I was also concerned about the number of black, Asian and minority ethnic young offenders at Cookham Wood, and I want to link that to the Lammy review, which was published on 8 September, and improving outcomes for young black and/or Muslim men in the criminal justice system. The review states that BAME people make up 3% of the population but more than 12% of the adult prison population, and the proportion of under-18s in custody who are BAME has risen from 25% in 2006 to 41% in 2016. There is a disproportionate number of BAME prisoners in the criminal justice system at a cost to taxpayers of at least £309 million each year.

The Lammy review highlighted three key themes for action. The first is to strengthen the link between scrutiny and equitable decision making on the fairness of the system. That means using the principle of “explain or reform”, so that if there is no evidence-based explanation for the disparities, they should be addressed through reform. The second is understanding and addressing the trust deficit. The Centre for Justice Innovation has found that more than half of British-born BAME people believe that the criminal justice system discriminates against particular groups, compared with 35% of British-born white people. The third is identifying where responsibilities lie beyond the criminal justice system. Issues include parenting, the exploitation of young people, and the need for closer work with communities to hold offenders to account.

The review made 35 recommendations and considered how they relate to prisons, among other areas, and preventing reoffending. One of the recommendations was to collect data. What do the Government plan to do in relation to collecting and disclosing data on the ethnicity of prisoners and offenders?

I am also concerned about the basic screening custody tool for reception and resettlement. I am aware of problems faced by community rehabilitation centres and their subcontractors in receiving data that would help them to inform their view of what help a prisoner may need for resettlement. I am firmly of the view that more investment is needed for resettlement to work in prison.

As has been said, there is serious concern about the state of some of our older prisons, whose living conditions are poor and inadequate. Hon. Members may have read recently about the appalling conditions at HMP Liverpool. There is also concern about the staffing of our prisons, with 95 out of 104 of Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service prisons being understaffed. There are 13% fewer operational staff than in 2010, and we all know that a full complement of staff is required to keep prisoners safe and protected from violence, and to help to reduce the prevalence of psychoactive drugs in our prisons.

One of the reasons why there is such demand for psychoactive drugs is the fact that many prisoners are locked up for long periods. It is a widely held view that more purposeful activity outside cells is a good way to reduce demand for drugs. Similarly, more staffing would help to keep vulnerable prisoners safe. It is worrying that there were 120 suicides in prison in 2016, which was double the number in 2012. We need to keep prison staff...
safe as well. In the 12 months prior to March 2017, there were 7,159 assaults on prison staff, which was a 32% increase on the previous 12-month period.

In conclusion, the Minister and the Ministry of Justice have much work to do if they want to reduce reoffending among prisoners.

1.46 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Prison safety and reform will continue to be major priorities for the Justice Committee until the challenges facing prisons are stabilised. I want to focus on governor empowerment and on young adults in our prisons.

The increase in assaults, self-harm and self-inflicted deaths are all unsurprising, given rising prisoner numbers, over-occupied prisons, understaffing, and the wave of psychoactive drugs that have been washing over prisons for the past couple of years. How can the system turn prisoners’ lives around when too many are locked up for 22 hours a day and are unable to access education, treatment or work? Those are major challenges not only for prison governors, but for Ministers, the MOJ and the Prisons and Probation Service.

In the Queen’s Speech of 2016, there was a plan that prisons would be independent legal entities, with the power to enter into contracts, generate income and appoint their own boards. Both the Secretary of State and, more recently, one of his Ministers have said that they remain committed to continuing to work towards not only making prisons places of safety, but reforming them.

The Justice Committee, of which I have been a member since September, agrees that prison management and the provision of safe and secure prison conditions that promote rehabilitation are complex activities that must be well grounded in evidence. I would add that adequate resources are also crucial.

I remember, once upon a time, when governors could be incentivised to reduce the reoffending rates of those released from their establishments. Even now, there are many examples of positive good practice in prison, a number of which have been mentioned today. Overarching that, however, there appears to be no joined-up strategy of rehabilitation, or even of reform. The prison system seems to be always in crisis management mode. This is exactly the time for clear lines of accountability between the Ministry of Justice, the Prison and Probation Service and governors. Those lines appear fuzzy at best to members of the Justice Committee.

What is the current status of devolution to governors? What support have governors been given to implement the empowerment agenda? Where is the review of reform prisons? Overarching that, where are the levers, and who gets upset when there are failures?

I want to move on to young adults in the criminal justice system. I draw the House’s attention to my former trusteeship of the Barrow Cadbury Trust, which initiated the Transition to Adulthood Alliance. Young adults aged 18 to 25 are a distinct group: only 10% of the general population, but accounting for 17% of those sentenced to prison every year. That is, admittedly, a drop from 25%, but is still too many people at a key stage in their vulnerable lives. Research shows that when policy makers, sentencers and practitioners take into account developmental maturity and the particular needs of young adults, they are more likely to grow out of crime.

Those results were reflected in a key recommendation by the Justice Committee in its inquiry into young adults in 2016. A week ago, the MOJ released a study that supports the Transition to Adulthood Alliance’s long-standing campaign for criminal justice agencies to take account of young adults’ maturity in service design and delivery. Given the Government’s research findings, what assurance can they give that they will provide a distinct regime for young adult offenders, as proposed by the TZA Alliance and the Justice Committee?

We all have to ask what prisons are for. I hope that, instead of prisons just warehousing prisoners, as too often seems to be the case, the Secretary of State and the Minister will take responsibility for ensuring that our prisons are humane and safe, and that they turn lives around and reduce reoffending.

1.51 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Given the short time available, I hope that hon. Members will not mind if I restrict my comments to the conditions of my local prison, HMP Wormwood Scrubs, especially as the debate coincides with the publication of the independent monitoring board’s report last week. I start by paying tribute to Rob Foreman, the chairman of the board, and his predecessor, Chris Hammond. They have done an excellent job, as do the overwhelming majority of staff at the prison, who show dedication and professionalism.

I was initially heartened when I read the covering press release, which said that promising changes had been made in some areas, such as the introduction of more CCTV and a new system for prisoners to access their property—it is true that in July the Scrubs went from grade 1, the worst grade which only a handful of prisons are in at any one time, to grade 2—but that is probably where the good news stops. We have to be frank about this: there is nothing new about problems at the Scrubs. Many years ago, it had problems with violence against prisoners and poor management. An HMI report in only April last year talked about rat-infested and overcrowded conditions, with some prisoners too frightened to leave their cells.

The difficulty is that the current problems are specifically connected to underfunding, poor services and low staff numbers, despite what we are told are efforts by the Government to increase staffing, having cut it back so dramatically under the coalition Government. There were still 57 members of staff out last year, and only 21 in.

The report says that “complaints made by prisoners are sometimes handled inappropriately, or passed to the staff member who is the subject of the complaint.” It says that the “lack of maintenance…means that prisoners are frequently subjected to conditions that are indecent and not suitable for them to live in.”

Prisoners experience unacceptable delays in accessing medical treatment, and the report says that “Care UK is not always able to provide enough staff to deliver…triage and screening processes.”
On the key issue of safety, the report says that 40 to 50 violent incidents occur in a typical month, 25% of which are gang-related. The prison has “the second highest number of prisoners moved by ‘Tornado teams’” and had four deaths in custody.

A terrible contractor called Carillion is responsible for maintenance, but the report says that beds were in poor condition, that toilets were broken, that cells were unheated, that staff worked in overcoats, and that there were no working urinals in parts of the prison. People are living in medieval conditions.

As for the education services, attendance at classes in June was 24%, and the library was closed for several weeks because Carillion could not fix the alarm. The Koestler Trust, which does fantastic work in prisoner art, is based in the old governor’s house outside the prison, but there is no art teaching inside. These are truly terrible conditions.

The prison has the worst record in London for accessing legal help. What that means in practice, when solicitors try to see their clients, is, to quote the report, that “prisoners are effectively being denied access to legal advice.” I ask the Minister to look at that, because it is not acceptable in any of our prisons, especially one that is 45% remand.

The private community rehabilitation company is MTCNovo, which I remember telling the shadow Justice Minister was not a good appointment. The report says that it does not sufficiently engage with prisoners before their release, with far too many released without any accommodation to go to. Is it any wonder that reoffending rates are so high when that is the background? It is not an accident that we are talking about companies such as Care UK, Carillion and MTCNovo. The privatisation of prison services lies behind what has happened to a substantial extent.

When the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) became Justice Secretary, we were promised a prisons revolution, but of course he did not stay around long enough to achieve that. It is odd to think that the right hon. Gentleman would be seen as the champion of the underdog in that way, but he was following the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling), and a tip for anyone wants to have a good reputation is to follow him into a job. What will the Minister do to address the appalling conditions that are experienced every day in our prisons?

1.56 pm

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): I want to concentrate on just one aspect of the prison system: the workforce. Prison officers are working with people with complex mental health issues and people who have experienced trauma throughout their lives. Prison officers work day in and day out with people who may assault them. They keep watch over people who want to end their life. They are at the forefront of tackling organised crime; work to intercept drugs; have to work in high-conflict and high-tension situations; and suffer intolerable abuse. Prison officers have told me about the unbelievable and disgusting practice of “potting”, which involves prisoners dumping a bucket of urine and excrement over the head of a prison officer. They are routinely spat at. Every day, 20 staff are assaulted.

Somehow, prison officers are not seen as frontline workers, but I want to challenge that in the strongest terms. Although their work is behind closed doors, their heroics should be seen and valued in the same way as other public sector workers.

The increase in violence and tension in prisons cannot be seen in a vacuum. It is part of the perfect storm that has been mentioned—huge cuts to prison staff, a massive increase in the use of the drug Spice, and an historically high prison population. Thousands of prisoner officer jobs have been cut. I know there has been an effort to recruit more prison officers, and that is welcome, but they enter the service on very different terms and conditions compared to those with longer service. Even those with longer service have had their terms and conditions radically altered. They are now expected to work much longer. Recruitment drives aside, the ability to retain new recruits remains in question.

I agree with the POA that 68 is too late a retirement age for such a strenuous and stressful job, and I support its members in challenging that increased pension age. It would be hard to argue against a clear correlation between the difficulties in recruitment and retention of prison staff and the erosion in pay, terms and conditions, alongside the difficult circumstances I have described. I met a prison officer recently who said that their pay was only £13 more than seven years ago, and that was someone with more than 30 years of service. That cannot be right.

Staff shortages are more pronounced in the south, but those shortages have an impact on other regions—in particular, the north-east—through the detached duty system. If I get anything out of this debate, I hope it is an assurance that the Minister will look into that system. It sees prison officers from my region being asked to work away from home for prolonged periods of time, staying in hotels and being sent to prisons where they do not have a long-standing relationship with the prisoners, and have no in-depth understanding or knowledge of their needs, issues or personalities, making shifts more precarious. The Justice Committee found that the first 13 months of the scheme cost the taxpayer £63.5 million. I would like to know how much that system has cost to date. Should the Department not have considered spending that money on providing incentives for those jobs, making it more likely that people in the south would apply? I am told that many workers in the north only accept detached duty because of their own dwindling pay.

If we are serious about addressing the crisis in our prisons, we must start with the workers. We have to ensure that they are working in safe conditions—I believe that safety is in numbers—and that there is a concerted effort to keep more experienced workers alongside newer staff. Through the cuts, we have lost far too much organisational knowledge and experience in our Prison Service. There must be acknowledgement that being a prison officer is a strenuous frontline job. It is completely untenable to make these people work until 68, with that really difficult fitness test. In fact, it would be more expensive for the service through things such as temporary injury benefits and medical inefficiency payments.

We have to value these workers by turning the Prison Service into something that offers a career again, rather than just a job. To do this, we must stop wasting millions of pounds on short-term sticking-plaster solutions, and really invest in the workforce.
Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) on setting the scene so well. We have heard constructive contributions from Members on both sides of the Chamber. It is always good to have a Northern Ireland contribution in a debate on a matter that, to be honest, is devolved. It is good to hear observations from us in Northern Ireland; we encourage some of the recommendations that have been made, and have some suggestions that the Minister could perhaps look into.

I am very much of the school of thought that prisons play a key part in the structure of the nation in a twofold manner. I am thinking of the three Rs. The first is clearly retribution, which happens because the prisoner has done wrong and the courts have decided on a jail sentence. But alongside that, we need the other Rs: rehabilitation and retraining. If those elements are part of the process, we have a genuine chance of turning people around. I want that to be part of what we are trying to achieve through legislation and through the Select Committee.

We cannot ignore the rising number of suicides in our prisons. I think every hon. Member who has spoken today has mentioned this, and it is important to do so. Although the number of suicides in prison has doubled since 2013, the prison population has also doubled over the same time. But the number of suicides in prison is still higher than the average in the general populace. In prison, 120 people per 100,000 commit suicide, which compares with 10.8 people per 100,000 outside prison. I hope that the Minister will respond to that point and see what we can do.

The Prison Reform Trust has stated that prisons in the UK are currently holding 7,300 people more than capacity. The hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) mentioned assaults on prison officers. I am very aware of that issue because a lot of people working in prisons in my constituency—this is not a point for the Minister to respond to—are subject to assaults on a regular basis. There has been a 27% increase in assaults compared with last year, and reports say that officers are outnumbered three to one in some prisons. We must consider the need to develop inmates into efficient and beneficial members of society, including those who have unfortunately been involved in assaulting prison officers. We need to turn this situation around.

The hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), who is no longer in her place, mentioned gardening and the other work that has been done in some prisons. The Minister responded by giving her the opportunity to be the judge of the prisons’ gardening competition. There are things that can be done, but we are not seeing enough of them. We need more to happen. We must work our hardest to prevent those who have served their time from becoming repeat offenders. It is so important to address that issue compassionately, directly, efficiently and in a way that actually works.

The fact that 26% of those who serve their time reoffend within the next six months provides us with a clear example of how the prison system has—say this gently—failed them. Only one in five employers says they would exclude or would likely exclude former prisoners from the recruitment process. Some 11% of those released from prison cannot get accommodation. It is important that we address these issues.

We are witnessing a dramatic change in the operation of our prisons, with fewer staff being responsible. We have not seen—again, I say this gently and graciously—the increase in the number of staff in prisons that perhaps we should have seen. I understand that only 75 members of staff have been recruited this year, when there is a dearth of more than 2,000. I also believe that 27% of frontline staff leave the role before two years of service. What are we doing to keep staff on board and not to lose them? We must establish a support system that helps new staff to acclimatise and adjust, not simply leave the service.

There are significantly high levels of mental health issues within our prisons. An unbelievable 26% of women and 16% of men in prison have received treatment or are currently receiving treatment for a mental health problem in the first year of their sentence. Everyone in this Chamber wants the same thing; it is about how we achieve it. I look to the Minister for his response; we are all here to support him. I hope we can get the results that we want.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Before I call the spokesman for the Scottish National party, the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), I am sure that it does not compromise my impartiality in the Chair if I wish him and his colleagues in Paisley the best of luck for the exciting announcement in about four and a half hours’ time of which town or city will be the city of culture 2021. I hope it is going to be Paisley—good luck.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was concerned that I would be unable to shoehorn a mention of Paisley 2021 into a speech on prison reform in England and Wales, but you have managed it for me, so thanks very much. I will carry your best wishes back home on the 4.55 pm flight, if I make it to Heathrow on time. It is also an honour, as usual, to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

Although I am a relatively new member of the Justice Committee, and although some of my contribution today will be based on my short experience serving on the Committee, I should note that I am speaking from the SNP Front Bench and will tailor my remarks appropriately.

The small matter of prison reform in England and Wales has dominated much of the work of the Justice Committee since I was appointed after the general election, and it will continue to feature heavily in the coming weeks and months. However, this work is not new to the Committee, given its good work on this issue in the last Session, particularly on scrutinising reforms put forward by previous Justice Secretaries.

The Queen’s Speech was a missed opportunity for the Government to introduce a Bill that would continue the reforms of the English and Welsh Prison Service. This was unfortunate, as the evidence is clear—indeed, the Committee saw for itself just last week—that the Prison Service is facing some very real challenges. The Government cannot be distracted by Brexit at the expense of modernising the English and Welsh justice systems.
Despite the required reforms being wide-ranging, I will consign my remarks to the attempts that are being made to keep people out of the criminal justice system, including the attempts to reduce reoffending. The goal of keeping people out of prison is a basic premise that I am sure we can all agree on. Not only is it good for the individual; it is vital for our wider society and economy. Prison is obviously a necessary and appropriate route for those who commit serious crimes, but detaining an individual has to be for the right reasons and it should not be seen as the automatic result for everyone who commits a crime.

Reducing the prison population is a key feature of the Government’s proposed reforms to the Prison Service and it is easy to see why that is the case. An exceedingly high prison population is not uncommon in most western democracies, but it is still worth noting that the total prison population in England and Wales on 31 March this year was just over 85,500 people. The recent prison population trend is cause for great concern and will rightly be a major influence in any reforms that the Government eventually introduce.

An exceedingly high prison population serves little good. It is not good for society, the economy or the taxpayer. In many cases, it will not be good for the offender or, indeed, the victim. The current prison population of England and Wales raises some difficult questions for the justice system. As we seek to confront this issue, we should be asking ourselves whether we are detaining the right people or if the criminal justice system still considers prison time to be the automatic outcome for the majority of those who commit crimes.

The PCS, too, has spoken of the significant changes that have affected the Prison Service. Chiefly, the prison population has doubled in the last 30 years while successive Governments have failed to protect funding and staffing numbers. That, in turn, helps to create a much more difficult, stressful and dangerous working environment for those working in the Prison Service.

I repeat that most other European countries are facing similar problems. However, we should take note of the Council of Europe report, which concludes that the UK has the highest prison population rate in western Europe. It states that England and Wales has a prison population rate of around 148 inmates per 100,000 citizens—well above the European average of 134.

In Scotland, we face similar challenges with our prison population. However, the annual daily average prison population has decreased in each of the last five years, falling by over 8% over that period, from 8,179 in 2011-12 to 7,500 in 2016-17. In addition, in the same period, the young offender population has almost halved, with numbers for remand and sentenced prisoners also dropping by that proportion.

However, the Scottish Government are not complacent. At a time when crime is at a 41-year low and recidivism rates are the lowest in 16 years, our prison population is still far too high, particularly among female offenders.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Through you, Madam Deputy Speaker, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who has run an excellent campaign for Paisley 2021, and I very much hope that he gets the news he is looking for tonight.

Will my hon. Friend join me in commending the Scottish Government, and particularly the Justice Secretary, Michael Matheson, for the progressive approach we have seen towards women in the prison system? Will he also welcome the £1.5 million extra for community justice services for women?

Gavin Newlands: Absolutely. I could not agree more. In addition, we are going to close the Cornton Vale prison in 2020, demolish the old facility and move 80 women who need more security, as well as having five new community facilities, which the £1.5 million additional investment will pay for.

Another area where the UK Government may want to take inspiration from the Scottish Government is the policy of a presumption against short sentences, which was recently augmented in the programme for government, with a plan to consult on an extension of the presumption from three months to 12 months. Overwhelming evidence confirms that short sentences simply do not work. They disrupt families and communities. They restrict employment opportunities and make it harder for individuals to access housing. Short-term sentencing does nothing for recidivism rates; in fact, the absolute opposite is the case. Short sentences are, therefore, not effective, and nor do they make sensible use of all-too-scarce public resources.

A Scottish Government extension of a presumption against short sentences gives us the very real opportunity to place Scotland at the forefront of introducing a transformative justice system. Karyn McCluskey, from Community Justice Scotland, has commented on the Scottish Government’s new policy, saying:

“A smart justice system replaces ineffective short sentences with a problem-solving focus on addiction, mental health, poverty, social exclusion and adverse childhood experiences—and recognises prevention is better than cure.”

This move by the Scottish Government has also been welcomed by the former Deputy First Minister of Scotland, Lord Wallace of Tankerness, a Liberal Democrat peer in the other place—or the upside down, as I like to call it.

David Linden: Careful now!

Gavin Newlands: I think I got away with that one.

Lord Wallace said the policy was a “welcome and imaginative extension of the presumption against short sentences.”

Former Labour First Minister, Henry McLeish, also supports the policy, saying that 60% of those who are imprisoned for three months or less are reconvicted within the year.

Therefore, this imaginative policy from the Scottish Government is not only helping to reduce our prison population, but is doing so in a way that is helping to tackle reoffending rates and transforming criminals into valuable members of society.

The UK Government’s previous White Paper placed a strong emphasis on preparing prisoners for life after their sentence has come to an end and helping to support them to change their behaviour. Now, I support many of the Government’s aims, such as tackling health and substance misuse issues, helping to prepare individuals for working life after prison and improving access to education and training. However, it is vital that we fund
and support projects, voluntary groups and charities that can effectively evidence the positive impact their work has on changing the lives of prisoners.

As the SNP’s Westminster spokesperson for sport, and as someone who has always been involved in sport, I passionately believe that Governments of all colours should be tapping into the power of sport to help to change attitudes and behaviours. As a rugby man, I am particularly interested in the work that Saracens rugby club has done to help reduce reoffending rates. Saracens rightly point out that 70% of young offenders leaving prisons in England and Wales will reoffend within 12 months, primarily due to a lack of support and motivation, low career aspirations and not having positive role models in their lives.

The Saracens’ Get Onside programme uses the power of rugby to help to improve the life chances of young people leaving the justice system. The programme is based in Feltham young offenders institution and aims to build career aspirations, to provide mentors and a link to a local sports club, and to assist in finding educational routes or employment. That will, in turn, give offenders a sense of belonging, and it surrounds them in a positive environment.

Currently, in terms of the Get Onside programme’s success rate, 92% of young offenders do not return to crime, saving the Government and the taxpayer around £1 million a year. On their website, the Saracens published a quote from a participant in the programme, who said:

“The project helped to give me belief and direction and taught me that I must be true to myself to achieve.”

This programme, and many like it, highlights how we can use the power of sport to produce tangible social benefits for individuals and wider society. Sport can play a positive and key role in helping to rehabilitate offenders, as well as playing an important preventive role in keeping people of all genders away from crime altogether. As such, the Government would be missing an open goal if they did not incorporate the power of sport into their wider reform agenda.

As the UK Government move forward with reforms, it is important to note that they have a responsibility to wider society by ensuring communities are safe and wrongdoers are dealt with in the appropriate manner. However, they also have a responsibility to those working in the justice system. It is a fact that the number of serious assaults on officers in Scottish prisons is 90% lower than in prisons in England and Wales, mainly due to the number of officers who are in the system because we did not cut the funding for officers.

I hope that the Minister can expand on the answer he gave me recently when I asked whether, given the increase of more than 1,300 in the prison population in England and Wales, 2,500 extra officers were enough. The answer was:

“The 2,500 target is obviously based on careful analysis of what we need in order to deliver the offender management model, which means one prison officer having a six-prisoner caseload, and it should be capable ofallowing us to do so.”—[Official Report, 12 October 2017; Vol. 629, c. 453W]

In his summing up, I would like the Minister to give a bit more information on that. Was the 2,500 figure arrived at assuming an increase of 1,300 in the population, or do a further 216 officers need to be hired, using the one in six ratio he gave me?

We all want to keep people out of prison, and that has to include adopting preventive and effective policies that tackle and help those at risk of reoffending. I can only hope that, as the UK Government move forward in this process, they will reject taking a flawed, ideologically driven approach and instead undertake an evidenced-based approach, taking on board the recommendations that the Justice Committee makes, to ensure that the English and Welsh justice systems can operate in modern and efficient manner.

2.17 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I would like to begin by congratulating the Chair of the Justice Committee, the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), and the other members of the Committee on all their work and on securing today’s debate. I previously served on the Committee, and it was a most valuable experience.

The Committee has repeatedly shone a spotlight on the ongoing crisis affecting much of our justice system, and its work will become even more important over the coming months, given that the Ministry of Justice budget is set to be cut by another £800 million—by 40% over the decade to 2020—making the MOJ the most cut of any Department.

Turning to today’s topic, our prisons have received vast media coverage over the past year—nearly always for the wrong reasons. The word “crisis” has been used time after time as a descriptor, but it is no longer sufficient. We have warned of crisis for five years—unfortunately, crisis is the new norm. The staff holding the service together are expected to do crisis management. The truth is that our prisons are now moving beyond crisis and are approaching emergency.

Peter Clarke, the chief inspector of prisons, with whom I had the pleasure of undertaking a prison visit, described the situation in his scathing annual report:

“Last year I reported that too many of our prisons had become unacceptably violent and dangerous places. The situation has not improved—in fact, it has become worse.”

He went on to warn that not one young offender institute was deemed safe, describing the “speed of decline” as “staggering”. He described a Dickensian prison system with people “locked up for as much as 23 hours a day”, which is “compounded by staffing levels...that are...too low to keep order” or to “run a decent regime that allows prisoners to be let out of their cells to get to training and education”.

I would argue that it is the Government’s policy of slashing hundreds of millions from the Prison Service budget that has driven us into the emergency room.

Perhaps the starkest example of the prisons emergency is what the Justice Committee, in its sixth report of the 2015-16 Session, described as “the ongoing and rapid deterioration in prison safety”.

It was right to do so. It is a stain on our nation that self-harm and suicides are at record levels and that assaults are up by almost 80% on 2010. Every day, 74 people are attacked in our prisons—one every 20 minutes, morning, noon and night, every single day of the year. The consequences of this violence are dire. With prisoners...
locked permanently in their cells to maintain safety, it is almost irrelevant whether education, training or mental health services are improved. Locked in their cells for that amount of time, they remain inaccessible, at a great cost to wider society. This violence is closely connected to another theme addressed by the Select Committee—empowering governors and prison reforms. The Government talk of a reform agenda delivering a modern prison estate fit for the 21st century and of governors self-managing their education budgets to help prisoners, but none of that will bear fruit until the epidemic of violence is tackled.

The central cause of the prisons emergency has been the loss of staff. Conservative Justice Secretaries have cut the number of frontline prison officers by almost 7,000 since 2010. New psychoactive substances, drones and phones are all serious problems in our prisons. As the POA says, staffing shortages drive the wave of violence. I welcome the fact that the Government now acknowledge the damage done by thousands of prison officer cuts and have begun to try to reverse their own cuts, but the staffing picture is not, I am afraid, as rosé as the Government seek to portray it. Despite 1,200 extra officers recruited over the past year, one in four of our prisons has still had a fall in officer numbers in the past 12 months. That includes staffing cuts at 25% of the prisons labelled as being of concern. In high-security prisons, it is even worse: half those prisons have fewer officers than they had a year ago. For all the talk of empowering governors, the number of governor-grade staff has been cut by over one third and continues to fall.

Staffing cannot be permanently resolved separately from pay. The insulting 1.7% recent pay offer was yet another real-terms pay cut—a cut of £980 per year for the average prison officer. Falling pay is one of the reasons there is an exodus of experienced officers, who are now leaving at three times the rate back in 2010. The Government’s policies are creating a dangerous cocktail of experienced prisoners and inexperienced prison staff.

The motion addresses the wider restructuring of the prisons system. The Government have destabilised the prisons system through an erratic reform policy that veered first this way and then that way, while prisons were being stripped of valuable resources, both human and financial. This has not been helped by the constant chopping and changing of those at the top. I have been shadow Justice Secretary for just over 18 months, and I have already dealt with three Justice Secretaries, each with their own specific vision. One of the current Secretary of State’s first tasks was to toss aside the Prisons and Courts Bill and the creation of a statutory purpose for prisons. That was especially regrettable as it had the support of virtually the whole House. Although the Government have scrapped the Bill, one thing remains the same: their answer to the deep problems in the prison service is yet more reform. I am a bit sceptical.

Concerns about how reform is being undertaken were especially well expressed by the president of the Prison Governors Association, Andrea Albutt, who decried the fact that governors have seen nothing tangible coming out of the MOJ to ease the burden to date. The PGA complains of the MOJ’s prison reform programme draining resources, with expensive policy teams in Whitehall, operational experts taken out of prisons and put into the MOJ, and competing structures that sometimes undermine accountability. In short, if real powers rest in new Whitehall teams, budgets are cut and central contracts restrict freedom of decision, governors are not in charge in the way that they should be.

Despite talk of greater autonomy, prison governors are still suffering the lack of control that arose from outsourcing key prison services to the private sector. The hiving off of facilities management and repairs has undermined basic decency in prisons. When prisoners are remarking that it is easier to get drugs than clean clothing, or when prisoners go for long periods without properly functioning showers or with a broken cell window, this does nothing to build the necessary institutional trust. It also makes reforming lives much harder. Labour has not only ruled out any more private prisons but committed to a review, working with prison governors, to identify the private maintenance and repair contracts that can be brought back in house over time, saving the state money and improving prison conditions. I heard the Chair of the Justice Committee call for an urgent review of these same contracts in Justice questions on Tuesday. Labour Members fully support his call.

The motion rightly points to our historically high prison population. Prison is not the answer to every problem of crime. I have been struck by the fact that nearly every time I meet a prison governor, they tell me that we are jailing too many people, and not enough to rehabilitate, but too often it is failing to do so. We now have 10,000 more prisoners in jails than we have proper places for. Rehabilitation cannot take place in overcrowded prisons. Armley Prison, in my home city of Leeds, holds nearly twice the number of prisoners that it was built to accommodate, and that is not an exception: the latest figures show that almost seven in 10 of our prisons are overcrowded.

As we have heard, such warehousing of people without any support or access to rehabilitation means that when they leave prison they are likely to be in the same position as when they entered—or perhaps even worse: drug-dependent, homeless and without the skills to get secure work. Their stay in prison will be too short to tackle their problems. In fact, they may come out of prison more likely to commit crime. I have been struck by the fact that nearly every time I meet a prison governor, they tell me that we are jailing too many people. They ask me why we are using vast resources to send someone to prison for a few weeks. They are frustrated at seeing the same people over and again. When people at the frontline raise such matters, we must all take them very seriously.

The evidence underlines the fact that, for far too many, prison is not working. Six in 10 adults released from prison after a sentence of less than 12 months, which over half of all prisoners receive, commit another offence within a year. The cost of reoffending has now hit £15 billion. As a society, we need to be asking if we should have jailed 8,000 women last year when the overwhelming majority committed a non-violent offence, with half in prison for theft. If prison is about rehabilitation as well as punishment, what is the point of seven in 10 women serving 12 weeks or less in jail? With a woman’s prison place costing just £47,000 a year, alternatives could free up valuable resources to invest in women’s centres and community solutions, and to make prison work for those who really should be there.
We need to tackle the discrimination that means there is a greater disproportionality in the number of black people in our prisons than in the prisons of the United States of America. It wastes lives as well as valuable public funds. Too many prisoners, as we have heard, are suffering from mental health issues and need intensive medical treatment, not incarceration. Perhaps most immediately, we need to tackle the cases of the imprisonment for public protection prisoners. We need to debate all three issues separately in this Chamber on another occasion.

In conclusion, we have a huge amount to do to turn our prisons around and make them places where lives are transformed, so that—this is our main objective—our communities become safer places to live. After nearly a decade of failed policies that have cut our prison service to the bone, that cannot and will not be done overnight, but the ongoing scrutiny of the Justice Committee will play a valuable role in helping to make our prisons work.

2.30 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) and the Justice Committee on securing the debate. I thank Members for their contributions, and I say genuinely that almost every one of today’s contributions was constructive, made in good faith and had some merit to it. My hon. Friend set out with characteristic clarity many of the issues that our prisons face. As we all know, and as the hon. Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) mentioned, nearly all prisoners will one day be released, and our prisons should therefore be places that put offenders on a path that will enable them to turn away from crime after release. That means providing a safe and secure environment, and providing the right interventions and support to help them to turn their lives around.

No one doubts the challenge that we face with prisons or expects the situation to be quick or easy to turn around. I do not shy away from conceding that our prison system faces unprecedented challenges, but I am confident that we have a clear and coherent plan to face them. That plan will secure the safety and security of our estate and staff, empower governors to make decisions that are right for their prisons and ensure that we have the right tools in place to support offenders to rejoin society as productive citizens.

The hon. Members for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) and for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands)—the hon. Gentleman is no longer in his place—referred to the motion, and specifically to its mention of our “historically high prison population”. We can all agree that the prison population is too high, and we want it to fall. We have, however, made a considered judgment deliberately not to set an arbitrary target for reduction, because we will not compromise on our responsibility either to the victims of offences or to the safety of the wider public.

We will always hold in prison criminals whose offences are so grave that no other penalty will suffice, or who would pose a genuine threat to the public if they were released. The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North mentioned that the Government should have a presumption against prison sentences of less than 12 months. Indeed, in England and Wales there is a presumption against custody at all, and a judge will send someone to prison only if they deem it right to do so.

It is important to remember that our current prison population reflects the number of serious offences—including sexual offences—that are coming before the courts. That has changed the nature of sentencing, with fewer people being sent to prison on short sentences but more people in prison for serious crimes on longer sentences. To give the House one example, there are now 4,000 more sex offenders in prison in England and Wales than there were in 2010.

I can assure the House that we will always have enough prison places for offenders who are sentenced to custody by our courts, and that protection of the public and providing justice to victims will remain our principal concern. Our latest statistics show that we have operational capacity of 87,370, and a current headroom of 1,241 places. The current population is 86,129, which includes 4,048 women prisoners. Of course, we cannot simply build our way out of the situation, but we have a plan for bringing in new capacity to the estate to provide modern, cost-effective, fit-for-purpose accommodation that will deal with the concerns that have been raised about overcrowding in the estate. HMP Berwyn currently has 800 places in use and will, when fully operational, provide 2,100 places. In addition, we have announced plans to build four more modern prisons.

Robert Neill: The Minister has talked about capacity, and I understand the work that is being done. A specific point that has been raised with the Select Committee is the slowness of repatriation of foreign national prisoners who are serving sentences in the UK. Repatriation of such prisoners would certainly take some pressure off capacity. Can he help on that point?

Mr Gyimah: The Chair of the Select Committee makes an important point about the repatriation of foreign national offenders. He will be aware that the most effective scheme to repatriate foreign offenders is the early release scheme, under which 40,000 foreign national offenders have been moved out of the UK since 2010. Prisoner transfer agreements are also in place but they are a lot more challenging because they require the co-operation of the receiving Government, who do not always seem that keen to receive their own criminals back. A cross-governmental task force is focused on that very point.

To realise our vision for prisons, we must first make sure that they are secure environments that are free from drugs, violence and intimidation. Again, I do not shy away from acknowledging that the use and availability of drugs in our prisons is too high. The House has often discussed how the rise of psychoactive substances in our prisons was a game-changer, but it was when organised criminal groups moved in to take control of supply routes into prisons that the rules changed. Those groups have embedded themselves throughout the prison estate, becoming ever more sophisticated in driving the drug market and making enormous profits from peddling misery to those around them. Their activities have been facilitated by the rise of new technologies, such as phones.
and drones, which they have used to try to overcome our security. Those things represent an unprecedented threat that we have not faced before.

As our prison officers and law enforcement partners across the country regularly prove, however, we are more than up to that challenge, and our investment in security is bearing fruit. Last year alone, HMPPS officers recovered more than 225 kg of drugs from the prison estate. Our new team of specialist drone investigators has already helped to secure over 50 years of jail time for those involved, and the team is supporting ongoing investigations across the country.

We are providing officers with the tools that they need. We have already introduced drug tests for psychoactive substances across all prisons, provided every prison with signal detection equipment and trained more than 300 sniffer dogs specifically to detect new psychoactive substances. The right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson) asked about the availability of sniffer dogs to prisons. The dogs operate on a regional basis and are therefore available for prisons to call on as and when they are needed.

We are investing heavily in security and counter-terror measures, including £25 million to create the new security directorate in HMPPS. This year we will also invest more than £14 million in transforming our intelligence, search and disruption capability at local, national and regional level, to enable us better to identify and root out those who seek to supply drugs to our prisons. That investment includes more than £3 million to establish our serious organised crime units, which will relentlessly disrupt our most subversive offenders.

We are already seeing early successes from the new capability. A recent joint Prison Service and police operation at HMP Hewell, involving our specialist search teams and dogs, recovered 323 items, including 79 mobile phones, 29 improvised weapons, 50 litres of alcohol and a large quantity of drugs.

David Hanson: The Minister is indicating that those things are all intelligence-led. They should be routine.

Mr Gyimah: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, but we need to know what we are looking for, and we need to identify the prisoners who are most likely to have links with organised crime. We now know that about 6,000 prisoners have links with organised crime on the outside and are conduits for drugs into our prisons, and that allows us to be far more effective in what we are doing to combat those operations. It is still very early days, but the point I am making is that we are beginning to see success. As we go forward, we intend to build on these successes, through our new drugs plan, which he mentioned, and our work on corruption, where it exists—even if it be only among a very few officers. He will be hearing more from me about that shortly.

Of course, this is not just about seizing or intercepting drugs. We should never forget that we have a duty of care to our prisoners—we want to help offenders with drug problems—and more of our prisons now have specialist wings to support them in overcoming their dependencies. We are also working closely with health partners to provide information, guidance and support to prisoners, visitors and staff on the impact and damaging consequences of drugs.

Hon. Members have mentioned the safety of our prisons. Ensuring safety is partly about having the right staffing levels to deliver safe and consistent regimes, and we are making swift progress in recruiting the additional 2,500 staff in the adult estate we promised in 2016: 1,255 extra prison officers have been recruited in the last year, and officer numbers are now at their highest levels since August 2013. In the youth estate, we have likewise expanded frontline staff capacity in public sector youth offender institutions by about 20%.

Preventing suicide and self-harm is also a focus of mine. We are taking decisive action to reduce the levels of self-harm by strengthening the frontline. Each individual incident of suicide or self-harm is one too many and a source of deep tragedy. We have introduced new suicide and self-harm prevention training to give everyone working in prisons, whether officers or staff from other organisations, the confidence and skills they need to support those in their care. So far, more than 10,000 prison staff have started the training, and all new prison officer and prison custody officer recruits now complete the programme as part of their initial training. I am glad to say that the number of self-inflicted deaths in custody is significantly down from last year, although I will be the first to admit that there is still a lot of work to be done.

The Chair of the Select Committee referred to the architecture of the prison system and how we can hold ourselves to account. We are strengthening the ability of the inspectorate to hold the Government and the Prison Service to account and have introduced a new urgent notification process, which had formed part of the original Prisons and Courts Bill, to enable the Secretary of State to be alerted directly where the chief inspector has a significant and urgent concern about the performance of an institution. We launched that process last month. The Secretary of State will be directly alerted by the chief inspector if an urgent issue needs addressing to ensure that recommendations are acted upon immediately. A new team of specialists accountable to Ministers will ensure that immediate action is taken and will respond within 28 days with a more in-depth plan to ensure sustained, long-term improvement for the prison.

Andy Slaughter: I hear what the Minister is saying, but a lot of it sounds like firefighting. I quoted from a report on the Scrubs earlier, but tomorrow we have Her Majesty’s inspectorate’s report on the Scrubs—I do not know if he has seen it yet. I have not quoted from it because it is under embargo still, but it shows endemic, long-term problems that need powerful solutions, and I just do not hear that vision coming from the Government.

Mr Gyimah: The hon. Gentleman is being unfair. Recruiting more staff, investing in intelligence and technology, rolling out a drugs strategy, introducing an urgent notification process, giving more power to the inspectorate—all these things will solve the issues in our prison. I hear him on the Scrubs—I admit that there are deep-seated challenges there—but prisons are, always have been and always will be difficult places to manage. That said, we are making significant investment in tackling the problems in our prisons. As I have always said, it will not happen overnight, but the actions I am outlining show our determination and will to overcome the problems and make sure that our prisons are places of safety and reform.
Hon. Members have touched on employment and education. We have recently announced the new futures network, which will be a broker between prisons and the employment sector so as to help prisoners to find work on release and get better purposeful activity in prisons. The hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) mentioned that sometimes drug habits develop because prisoners are bored. Having more and better purposeful activity is important to ensuring that prisoners are purposefully occupied in prison and can gain new skills and improve their chances of finding a job on release.

My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) rightly mentioned the estate. Yes, the plan is to create 10,000 additional places. Of course, there have been issues with maintenance, but those are issues for facilities managers, and I am in direct contact with them to ensure that, whatever the future plans for a prison further down the line, we maintain standards of decency in that prison.

In conclusion, reducing reoffending, protecting the public, reforming offenders and ensuring the safety and security of our staff and those in our custody remain my Department’s top priorities.

Robert Neill: I appreciate the Minister’s remarks and the spirit of them. Will he confirm that the Government remain committed, when a legislative opportunity occurs, to placing the powers of the inspectorate, the prisons and probation ombudsman and the national prevention mechanism on a statutory basis?

Mr Gyimah: I can confirm that we are very alive in looking for legislative opportunities to do exactly what my hon. Friend says. He will be aware that where there are other avenues, such as private Members’ Bills—one to enable us to switch off mobile phones is going through the House now—to make practical progress, we are doing so.

We must break the ongoing cycle of reoffending that has for too long blighted communities the length of our country by helping offenders to turn their lives around and prepare them for a productive and law-abiding life on release. I will end by reiterating some of the remarks I made at the start of the debate. Reforming our prisons to be places of safety and reform will not be easy, but the House should be in no doubt about the energy and resolve with which we will continue to tackle head on the challenges that we face. I welcome many of the points made today. They were constructive. I disagree on a number of issues with the Opposition spokesperson, but I know that we all share the same intention: to make our prisons places of safety and to ensure that when people come out of prison, they do not reoffend.

2.46 pm

Robert Neill: I thank my 14 Back-Bench colleagues who contributed to this debate, and I appreciate the spirit of the Minister’s response. We look forward to working with him and his colleagues. He has not by any means answered all the questions raised in the debate, but that was partly a matter of time. We will need to continue to press the Government on several matters, but we look forward to doing that.

Since there is a lot of speculation today about what people have framed and put on their walls, in various contexts, perhaps I might commend something for the Minister’s wall. When Thomas Mott Osborne took over responsibility for Sing Sing penitentiary in New York, he said he was going to turn the jail from a scrap heap into a repair yard. That would not be a bad thing to have on the wall of every prison governor’s office and every office in NOMS and the MOJ.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House takes note of the Justice Committee’s Twelfth and Fourteenth Reports of Session 2016-17, on Prison reform and the Government Responses to them; notes with concern the continuing crisis in prisons in England and Wales, with an historically high prison population and unacceptably high levels of violence, drug availability and use, disturbances and self-harm and self-inflicted deaths in the adult and youth custodial estate; further notes the critical reports by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons on individual establishments and thematic issues; welcomes the Government’s intention to proceed with a programme of prison reform and to produce a prison safety and reform action plan as recommended by the Committee, and the publication of performance data on each prison from 26 October 2017; regrets the fact that the Government does not intend to bring forward legislation to establish a statutory purpose for prisons, enhance the powers of HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, and place the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (PPO) and the UK’s National Preventive Mechanism on a statutory basis; further regrets the Government’s rejection of the Committee’s recommendation that it should report at six-monthly intervals on the impact of governor empowerment on complaints made to the PPO and Independent Monitoring Boards; and calls on the Government to ensure that information on prison performance and safety is published regularly, and with sufficient detail and timeliness to enable the effective scrutiny of the management of prisons by the Ministry of Justice and HM Prison and Probation Service.
UK Fishing Industry


Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Before I call the hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) to move the motion, let me say that it will be obvious to the House that a great many Members wish to speak, and there is limited time, so there will be an immediate limit on Back-Bench speeches of five minutes after the hon. Lady’s speech.

2.48 pm

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the UK fishing industry.

It is a tradition that MPs debate the UK fishing industry at the beginning of December. Such debates give us the opportunity not only to raise matters relating to the UK industry as a whole, but to reflect on proposals for the following year’s total allowable catch, which are discussed at the December Council of Ministers. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting time for this very important debate, and for holding it in the Chamber, because we have on occasions had this debate in Westminster Hall.

Fishing is a dangerous practice, and my thoughts are with the fishermen and their families who have suffered loss and injury during the past year. I thank those in the rescue services, including the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, the coastguards and National Coastwatch Institution volunteers, for their selfless service to sea rescue. I also thank the Fishermen’s Mission and the Apostleship of the Sea for their work to support fishermen and their families at times of hardship.

The result of the EU referendum was well received by our fisher folk. Whoever I speak to says that they view the future with optimism. Indeed, Toms boatyard in my constituency informs me that it has many orders for vessels on its books. We have heard the Minister and the Secretary of State confirm on numerous occasions that, at the end of March 2019, the UK will leave the common fisheries policy. As a result, the Minister will be able to make decisions about the marine environment and catches of species without attending the meeting in Brussels and haggling with 27 other member states.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady reaffirm that, on the day we leave the EU, there will be no more negotiations and no more trading off, and that we will be out of the common fisheries policy so that we can decide for ourselves how we co-operate with other countries over our fishing? Will we take back control of our fishing on the day we leave?

Mrs Murray: As far as I am aware, when we leave the EU, we leave the common fisheries policy.

The UK has given notice that it will withdraw from the 1964 London convention, which gave some nations restricted access to the 12-mile limit. The UK 200-mile or median line limit is prescribed in the Fisheries Limits Act 1976 but, once we leave, the rules for the management and conservation of fish stocks, and indeed the amount of fish that can be taken, will be governed by the UN convention on the law of the sea, particularly articles 61 to 63. There is a clear distinction between UNCLOS and the CFP in as much as the UK will be free from the principle of equal access to a common resource on which the CFP is based.

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): Does my hon. Friend accept that that will allow us to manage better our sea bass stocks for both commercial and recreational fishermen?

Mrs Murray: I thank my hon. Friend, who will be interested to know that I will come on to that point.

It might be worth considering UNCLOS in more detail. Article 61 says we must be responsible for setting conservation measures, taking account of the scientific information available. Such information often comes from the well-respected International Council for the Exploration of the Sea, with which the UK scientific body the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science works.

In short, article 62 states that the coastal state—in our case, the UK—shall set the amount of fish that can be taken in our exclusive economic zone and determine whether our fleet can catch it all. If it cannot, we can offer the surplus to other nations, which must comply with any conservation measures that we have set. Interestingly, paragraph 4(h) of article 62 says that the coastal state can set laws concerning “the landing of all or any part of the catch by such vessels in the ports of the coastal State”.

It is worth noting that, in some instances, that could have a real economic benefit to the UK. Article 63 says that when a stock occurs in an adjacent EEZ, each coastal state shall work together to set conservation measures.

Zonal attachment is used by many nations to manage their fish stocks while ensuring economic benefit to the coastal state. A good example of zonal attachment is that of a farmer harvesting crops in his fields who does not invite his neighbours to come in and take those crops free of charge. According to a report by the University of the Highlands and Islands in 2016, EU boats overall landed 10 times more fish and shellfish—six times more by value—from the UK EEZ than UK boats did from the EU EEZ. For most individual member states, the imbalance was even greater. Iceland retains about 90% of the benefit from its fisheries in its attached zones, while the figure for Norway is 84%. In contrast, the UK secures a mere 40%, which can be attributed to the common fisheries policy. We give away—free to other nations—60% of the fish in our zone.

Has the Minister ensured that the historical catch data from all EU vessels that have fished in the UK EEZ has been collected? That could provide the basis for increased benefit in the UK zone once we leave the European Union. While any surplus quota that we are unable to utilise could be offered to other member states,
meaning that some economic gain for the UK might be obtained, we must make sure that UK fishermen come first.

A significant central feature of moving towards fishing our zonally attached fish will be increased catching opportunity. Once achieved, that opens up the happy possibility of managing fisheries innovatively, looking to optimise benefit for our nation and its communities across the seafood supply chain. The range of options is huge, and can be properly discussed once the enabling opportunity is secured. In the words of Bertie Armstrong, chief executive of the Scottish Fishermen’s Federation: “don’t stress over choosing the wallpaper before we’ve bought the flat.”

Let me turn to effort control in place of quota. Under the CFP we have a management system that comprises quotas and effort control in the form of kilowatt days. Will the Minister confirm that once we withdraw from the CFP, he will move away from that confusing system of fisheries management and put in place a something simpler? Many fishermen I have spoken to are not in favour of a days-at-sea scheme, but that warrants further investigation. Has the Minister spoken to his counterpart in the Faroe Islands, which operate a days-at-sea system, to find out how their management system works? Has he asked for the views of CEFAS on the days-at-sea scheme versus the use of quota?

Many inshore fishermen have expressed concern about access to the UK’s six and 12-mile limit by other member states fishing for certain species. There appears to have been disproportionate access to those limits for more than 40 years, and that must stop. A lot of inshore vessels are unable to migrate and have found themselves competing with many larger vessels from other nations in the same waters. Will the Minister give due thought to exclusive access for small UK fishermen to our 12-mile limit when considering any post-CFP management regime?

Turning to this year’s Council of Ministers meeting, it appears that an uplift of total allowable catch is proposed for a number of species. As a consequence, the available quota for the UK fleet will increase. It is also heartening to know that the serious uplift of opportunities that arose from the EU-Norway talks has resulted in better quotas. However, in areas VIId and VIIe off the south-west coast, I am surprised that the quota for Dover sole has not followed ICES recommendations. The uplift of quota proposed by the Commission is less than scientists have suggested. The South West Fish Producers Organisation has also expressed concern about sprat stocks in that area.

ICES advice still points to the bass stock being outside safe biological limits—that issue was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker)—and I have two concerns about bass stock. My constituent, Mr Chris Newman, contacted me last August after hauling in his trawl to find around 1,000 kg of bass. The bass was in abundance at the time because it swims with mackerel, and I had already heard that there was an abundance of mackerel locally. Because of how bass management currently works, Mr Newman would have had to catch 33 tonnes of species to legally land his bass, so he ended up having to discard much of it. That is disgraceful, not only because he was denied around £10,000 of income, but because much of that bass would not have survived once it was discarded.

It has been reported on social media this week that another fisherman in Plymouth was denied a similar income because he had to discard bass that he was prevented from landing. When will the EU realise that fish cannot be told not to swim into a trawl? The Secretary of State has described EU bass management as a “blunt management system”. Will my hon. Friend the Minister confirm that our post-CFP management of fisheries will be flexible enough to prevent such situations by invoking emergency measures?

Secondly with regard to bass, I want to make a point on behalf of recreational sea anglers. They have been allowed to keep a single bass from each year’s angling. It appears that, if implemented, the European Commission’s proposal for 2018 will prohibit a recreational hook-and-line bass angler from taking a single bass for the entire year for personal or family consumption. That is unacceptable and I ask the Minister to make representations at the Council of Ministers in support of those recreational fishers. A lot of young people go angling, and many of them would not recognise if they had a bass on the end of their line. How will we police that?

Mr Charles Walker: It is simply madness to suggest that someone in a west end restaurant can sit down to eat wild bass caught by a commercial fisherman, but that one of my hon. Friend’s constituents, or one of my constituents on a day out at the beach, cannot keep a single fish that they catch off the beach or on a boat. That is simply not tenable.

Mrs Murray: I take a different view. I think that there is a place for commercial fisherman and recreational sea anglers to work together with us. A lot of people who go into a restaurant and think they are buying British bass are actually ordering farmed bass that has been imported from abroad. We need to make sure that we have a flexible management system that accommodates everybody.

I would describe any possible transition period after March 2019 as a bridge. Nine months is all that is needed at the very most. Looking forward to December 2018, assuming that we get a satisfactory trade deal, will the Minister make it clear at the Fisheries Council negotiations that the UK will be introducing its own management system from 1 January 2020 at the very latest? After all, the necessary processes and coastal state arrangements already exist. We can ensure, from that date, that zonal attachment of fisheries will apply to the UK, as it does to many other nations around the world.

Many people have raised concerns about whether we could enforce any UK-set rules on fisheries, including on access. Will the Minister confirm that the UK already polices our 200-mile limit under the CFP using different tools? Fisheries protection vessels from the Royal Navy for England, Wales and Northern Ireland, the inshore fisheries and conservation authorities, and the Scottish Fisheries Protection Agency are all at sea making sure that the rules are enforced. Other enforcement tools include the electronic vessel monitoring equipment on board many vessels and observation aircraft. The UK will continue to enforce any rules it sets after we leave the CFP, as we have done for years.

I would like to raise briefly the Merchant Shipping Act 1988 and the Factortame case. Will the Minister confirm that we will be able to redo our economic links,
unfettered by that EU ruling? Nobody else permits foreign rights to national resources and assets to the degree the UK was forced into.

Finally, fishermen have always felt that their industry was sacrificed when we joined the European Economic Community. It is therefore necessary that we have a separation of catching opportunity/access, and access to the EU market. Those are separate subjects. Norway never let them be mixed. Indeed, there is no international precedent or supporting economic reasoning for doing that. For example, if France wants to sell us its wine and cheese, it must buy our fish. That is common sense. Will the Minister confirm that he will not sacrifice access to fishing resources for access to markets in any negotiation?

I wish my hon. Friend the Minister well in his negotiation next week. I know that he, like me, knows how important fisheries are to our coastal communities and that, like me, he is optimistic for the opportunities our fishermen will have after we leave the common fisheries policy.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. As I said earlier, there will now be a time limit of five minutes on Back-Bench speeches.

3.4 pm

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): May I associate myself with the remarks of the hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) about marine safety organisations and fishermen’s welfare organisations? I am thinking particularly of the Fishermen’s Mission, in a year which, thankfully, has been one of the better ones in terms of fatalities at sea.

I do not know whether you have had an opportunity to watch the wonderful BBC series “Blue Planet II”, Madam Deputy Speaker. If you have, you will have been inspired and moved by the wondrousness of our marine environment, but also by its vulnerability and fragility. While environmental degradation on land is visible to us—we see forests and species disappear, and we see desertification—what has been happening in our oceans for far too long has remained invisible to all except a dedicated band of marine scientists and divers, but now, thanks to that fantastic programme, it is there for all of us to see.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): When my right hon. Friend watched that programme, was he as concerned as I was by the amount of plastic being ingested by some of the marine life that later goes into our food chain?

Mr Bradshaw: Indeed I was. Thankfully, plastics are one of the more visible aspects of marine pollution, because we see them washed up on our beaches and the Government are taking action, but a great deal else that goes on is still invisible.

There is another big difference between land-based and sea-based environmental degradation. The sea is a place where the ancient human activity of hunting and gathering continues, and continues apace. As has just been pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), other human activity, such as the use of plastics, has its impacts, but much of it is invisible. Man-made climate change is leading to the warming and acidification of our oceans, with yet unknown consequences. It does not affect just marine life—including fish, as an edible resource—but the roles that the oceans themselves play in regulating our climate, our oxygen levels, and basically everything that makes human life on earth possible.

For most of human history, oceans and fish were simply plundered. That did not matter when there were relatively few human beings and fishing technology was relatively antiquated, but in the last 100 years or so, population growth and technological progress have completely changed that equation, with, in some instances, devastating consequences. We all know the story of the near eradication of bluefin tuna, turtles, cod off the north-east coast of the United States, and, in our own case, cod in the North sea. However, things have changed. Because of what was going on in the early noughties, politicians began to take notice and take action. There was collective endeavour, and it has worked. North sea cod has made a fantastic recovery, thanks to the difficult measures and decisions that I took as a fisheries Minister, which were massively criticised by the fishing industry at the time. There has even been progress on the high seas, which is much more difficult because of the lack of an international legal framework.

As anyone—I hope—can appreciate, managing our seas and fish stocks sustainably demands that countries work together. As has been said so often during our debates over the years, fish do not respect national borders; they swim about. Unlike the hon. Member for South East Cornwall, I have real concerns about the potential of Brexit to reverse the welcome progress that we have seen in the last 15 or 20 years. Let us be honest: the status quo is not a disaster. The hon. Lady herself spoke of recommendations for increased catches at this year’s meeting of the Council of Ministers. I wonder why that is the case. My local ports, Brixham and Plymouth, have just reported their best years in terms of the value of their catches. Species such as cuttlefish are doing incredibly well, and are being exported straight to markets in Italy, France and Spain. Our crab and lobster are also valuable exports.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: Is the right hon. Gentleman seriously saying that British fishermen want to stay in the common fisheries policy?

Mr Bradshaw: Some do, but they tend to be quiet, because they are shouted down by Members of Parliament like the hon. Lady. If she has honest conversations with sensible fishermen who care about the long-term sustainability of their stocks, she will find that not all of them share her views, and it would be inaccurate to suggest that they do.

As I was saying, some of our most valuable catches—and we in the south-west have enjoyed a record year in that regard—are exported straight to the markets of the European Union, tariff-free, while we are in the common fisheries policy. As a nation, we also depend on imports for 80% of what we consume, because of our taste for cod and haddock. So what will happen in the event of a bad deal or no deal, in terms of tariffs on these vital exports and the vital imports on which our producing and processing sector depend, and about which my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby will speak later?
The Brexiteers have sold the idea that if we leave the EU and unilaterally declare these marvellous limits, our fishers will suddenly get all these extra fish and massively increased quotas, our boats, which currently fish in other people’s waters, will be able to carry on regardless, and our vital exports will be completely unaffected. Like so many of the promises made by these modern-day wreckers, this is a cruel deception on our fishers and their communities. We need only look at the problems we have had this week with the Irish land border; imagine what will happen if, as the Brexiteers are proposing, the UK suddenly and unilaterally moves the international marine borders, and, in effect, declares fish wars on all our neighbours, excluding them from fishing grounds they have fished for hundreds of years and stealing the quota they consider legally theirs. It is a recipe for mayhem.

It is also a recipe for environmental disaster. We know from fisheries management all around the world that if international and supranational co-operation and collaboration break down, it is the fish and the marine environment that pay the price. The second cruel deception being played out is the suggestion that the Government are likely to make fisheries a priority. We need only look at our fishing industry’s value to our economy, compared with financial services, pharma and others. Are our Government honestly going to pick a political fight for fisheries, when all these other sectors are worth more to our economy? It is a cruel deception.

I have two further points. First, I ask the Minister to make bass a recreational stock, as Ireland has done, with huge success. I also ask the Minister to keep a place at that negotiating table, and when he goes to Brussels later this month, I ask him to stick with the science: stick with the evidence, and think about the fish and their future, and a healthy future for our fishing industry.

3.12 pm

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): It is a great pleasure to speak in this debate. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) for initiating it. I know of her great experience in the fishing industry. As she, above all others, will know from her personal loss from fishing, safety at sea is paramount. I pay tribute to her.

We look forward to our very able Fisheries Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), going to the December Council and coming back full of fish, and making sure that we have sufficient quota for our fishermen, because there is the science now to be able to say that for most quotaed species there are enough there for our fishermen to catch.

I am amazed that the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) is so pessimistic about the common fisheries policy. Whether we were a Brexiteer or a remainer, I think we can all accept that the one section of society that got well and truly stitched up when we first went into the Common Market was the fishing industry, because it put forward quotas that were reasonably accurate, while others put forward quotas that were not, and we landed up with a very small supply of what were potentially our own fish.

Mr Bradshaw: I completely agree: I think we were stuffed—is that parliamentary language?—when we joined. But I am not pessimistic about the common fisheries policy; I am realistic, and the hon. Gentleman must acknowledge that in the last 15 to 20 years, since we undertook these reforms, the picture has been improving.

Neil Parish: I accept that there have been improvements to the common fisheries policy, but there were many improvements to be made. We are getting on now to having discards banned from the common fisheries policy, which we as a nation can work on much better. We can also use a fishing management system similar to that of the Norwegians, where we can shut down an overfished area very quickly; they can do it within a day, whereas it is impossible to move that fast when there are 27 countries trying to come to an agreement. There are great opportunities to be had. There is no doubt—there are figures to prove it—that the European fishing vessels take from our waters some £530 million-worth of fish and we take about £110 million-worth of fish from their waters, so whichever way we look at it, there will be benefits for our fishermen.

Mr Charles Walker: As Chairman of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, will my hon. Friend look at the suggestion made by the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) about making bass a recreational species only? Will he and his Committee look into that?

Neil Parish: As Chairman of the Committee, I would be delighted to look at that. We look at all the evidence and look at exactly what can be done. There is a real place for recreational fishing, just as there is also very much a place for professional fishing. I would be very happy to look into that matter.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): As part of the study of the hon. Gentleman has agreed to undertake, will he look at the value to coastal towns of recreational fishing? In 2012, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs estimated that it was £2 billion a year. My angling shops, my coastal bed and breakfasts and my hotels all benefit from bass fishing, but the moratorium on anglers taking sea bass is a disaster for coastal towns.

Neil Parish: I actually believe that, as we come out of the common fisheries policy, there will be enough fish for everybody. If we manage the fish stocks much better, we will have every opportunity. We need to make much more of the fish that we catch, not only in the area of recreational fishing but in areas such as fish processing. I believe that we will have greater access to fish and be able to land much more of our fish on to our own shores, but when we do that, we must ensure that we process it and add value to it. We must also—dare I say it—say to all our population that we eat many types of fish when we go to the continent and to other parts of the world that we will not eat here. That is key, because we still have a huge market. Some 70% of the fish we land in the west of England is exported to France, Spain and across the rest of Europe. Those markets are very important, so we need to ensure that we get the fish, manage the fish stocks and market the fish.

On the question of Brexit and the common fisheries policy, we have a moment now, as we negotiate, when we have very positive cards in our hand. We can say to our neighbours, “There are historical arrangements that
we will look at, but at the end of the day, you will fish the amount that we agree under our rules, and that is the way it will be.” If we are absolutely firm with them—I expect the Minister to be exactly that—we can get a reasonable deal with our neighbours. I think our neighbours will deal with us in a fair way on this issue because, to be absolutely blunt, they have two choices. They can have the fish under our rules or they will not have the fish at all.

I want to reinforce the point that we must not negotiate away our fisheries again. Our fishermen did not forgive us when we did that the first time round. If we do it a second time, they will never forgive us. This is not just about our fishermen and what percentage of the overall economic benefit comes from fish; it is also about what is morally right and wrong. This is something that we can now put right. I am convinced that this can work, with the right policies in place. I suspect that the Minister is minded to keep a lot of our existing systems of catching through quota in place. Let us have evolution, not a revolution.

On discards, let us ensure that we land everything that we catch, so that we know exactly what the stocks are. Let us also look at which types of fish will recover if we catch, so that we know exactly what the stocks are. We are therefore left scratching our heads as to where the money will come from, and we must ensure that we police our waters as we leave the common fisheries policy.

3.19 pm

Mr Alan Campbell (Tynemouth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in your place, Madam Deputy Speaker. I welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) to her role on the Front Bench. She will be a strong voice for fishing and fishing communities.

In view of the frankly ludicrously short time available for this debate, I intend to keep my remarks brief and my points very local. My first point is about the continued availability of funding for infrastructure repair. North Shields port is the premier fishing port on the east coast and the biggest prawn port in England, landing around £7 million-worth of catch every year and sustaining around 300 jobs, but a recent report on the condition of the quay found that between £6 million and £8 million is needed for infrastructure repair. On 1 December, the projection jetty—an important part of the port where many boats are moored—was closed, and there is a real dilemma for those who make repairs. Does the North Shields Fish Quay make a bid? As a private company, it would be able to access only 50% of the funding from the European maritime and fisheries funds. Does the Port of Tyne do it? It can potentially access more funding but, like most trust ports around the country, it is not a small or medium-sized enterprise, so it does not fit into that category. We are therefore left scratching our heads as to where the money will come from, and fishermen are being prevented from going about their daily business. I wrote to the Minister earlier this week, and I hope that he will read of our concerns and ask his Department or, perhaps, the Marine Management Organisation to look into them, because getting an outcome and finding funding is urgent. In life after the common fisheries policy, will resources for infrastructure funding remain in place as they are now, because it is important to ports such as North Shields?

As for what post-CFP will look like, different areas will have different priorities. As I have said, North Shields is the biggest prawn port and therefore has an inshore fleet and a 12-mile limit is crucial, but it would suffice. Frankly, a 200-mile exclusive economic zone really is not relevant when, I am told, perhaps only one or two foreign vessels a year may fish those areas. Local fishermen are not particular exercised about that. North Shields has the biggest prawn port exports, with 95% of the prawns being exported. They are not processed or frozen; there are five days between them being caught and being put on tables, which are usually in European Union member states. Lorries cannot afford to wait at a hard border, and we cannot afford to have tariffs. The MMO currently issues around 300 catch certificates a year for exports to non-EU countries. If a certificate is required for every single lorry that goes to France, Spain or Italy, an estimated 21,000 certificates would be necessary, which would be a disaster for North Shields. What is the point of catching all that fish if there are no accessible markets? What is the Minister’s plan? What arrangements will be in place after we exit the CFP?

As for the salmon drift net fishery, there are only about a dozen licences on the north-east coast. They are being phased out, and that decision is based on evidence that is at least questionable because some of our rivers in Northumberland have had salmon runs for the first time in many years. We were previously told that licences needed to be phased out because the EU wanted to make them part of the whole sustainability issue, but the pressure does not come from the EU; it comes from landowners who want to protect their fishing rights to ensure that they get their share of the catches, because it is a big business. Post-CFP, will the Minister stand up to the landowners’ lobby? The fishermen in the heritages fisheries have enormous respect for the environment and a fantastic record of restocking our rivers, and it is in the interests of the fisheries that the fishermen’s interests are looked after.

In the seconds I have remaining, I invite all Members to come to see our new memorial to fishermen lost at sea, Fiddler’s Green, which was unveiled in September by Julie Myhill, the partner of James Noble—the most recent fisherman to lose his life. It reminds us that fishing is a dangerous job, and every policy maker must have that at the forefront of their mind.

3.24 pm

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): I am delighted to be called to speak in this important debate. It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Tynemouth (Mr Campbell). I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray), my constituency neighbour, on securing the debate.

First and foremost, as we leave the European Union, there are massive opportunities for our fishing industry to establish itself once again as functioning, economic and viable. Repatriation of our historical territorial fishing areas will give coastal communities such as mine a completely new lease of life. The UK must ensure full and absolute control of the UK’s 200-mile territory, up to the median lines, with fishing opportunities, access and regulatory regimes controlled once again by the UK Government.

Many people may ask what that will look like. I have been slightly sceptical about the days-at-sea proposal since examining the trial initiated by my right hon.
Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) back in 2011. I had concerns about overfishing, about the targeting of species close to the shore and about a lack of scientific data against which to measure catches. However, I recently had a meeting with Fishing for Leave and saw its proposals for excluding travel time to fishing destinations, including net soak time to measure catch effort, and for recording scientific data on which to measure this resource. These proposals would end the senseless discards that we have seen under the failed quota system implemented by the European Union.

In my remaining time, I will address a specific proposal from ICES on fishing for the dicentrarchus labrax—the European sea bass—that has caused consternation among my recreational sea anglers and among sea anglers across the UK. Although I recognise its latest statistics on the continued decline in the biomass of the stock and further recognise that something needs to be done, it should not be done on the back of the rod-and-line angler. As a member of the all-party angling group and a champion of the sea bass in Parliament, I recently had the pleasure of leading a delegation to Cornwall to fish for bass. We were hosted by a chap called Nick, who runs a successful family business called Bass Go Deeper. We had a successful trip, and all the fish were returned to the sea—catch and release. Nick, like many other bass guides in Cornwall and other hook-and-line beach and cliff anglers, will no longer be able to fish if the ridiculous and draconian proposals from ICES are implemented.

The suggestion is that anglers will be able to catch fish for catch and release for only six months of the year. They will not be able to target bass at all for the other six months of the year. If the proposals are truly meant for conservation, the angler is once again being penalised by comparison with the hook-and-line commercial fisheries that can effectively land 4 tonnes of catch each. Sport fishing in the UK is a lucrative and growing business. Businesses like Nick’s will go to the wall if these proposals are implemented. The recreational sea angling sector, which has had the least impact on fish mortality, will bear a disproportionate burden of last year’s negotiations, with a zero catch from January to June and a one-fish bag limit from July to September.

The impact of recreational sea angling on bass stocks is negligible, which demonstrates that the problem does not rest with the sea angler. That is why I support the campaign of the Angling Trust, the Save Our Sea Bass campaign and the European Anglers Alliance to stop these completely unfair and unenforceable proposals. Banning the public from fishing for a species recreationally while letting commercial hook-and-line fisheries continue is unjust and cannot be allowed.

As the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) has already said, Ireland and America have both embraced a recreational bass fishery and are seen as premium sport fishery areas.

Catching a fish and keeping it for the pot is not a crime. Catching a fish and cooking it for dinner is one of the last great remaining hunter-gatherer pursuits in this country. The Minister should fight for anglers and oppose these ridiculous measures, which would sink a fine pursuit and a fledgling industry. There are thousands of anglers out there who are looking for his support this year.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to take part in this most important debate. I apologise to the House now, as I did to your predecessor in the Chair, for the fact that, unfortunately, I will not be here at the conclusion of the debate. I am very aware that I will shortly be travelling towards Storm Caroline, and it is worth pauses for a second, as we debate in the relative calm of Westminster on a Thursday afternoon, to reflect that many of the fishermen in my constituency will be at sea in those conditions. It is worth remembering that they do a very difficult job in very dangerous circumstances, which is why we should be grateful to them for the work they do and to organisations such as the Coastguard, the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, the Fishermen’s Mission and others that do so much to support them.

It strikes me that this may be a small piece of history, as this is perhaps the last of these fisheries debates we will have in their current form. This time next year, we will be looking towards the final Fisheries Council in which we will part of the EU, which brings me to my first ask. The Scottish Fishermen’s Federation and the Shetland Fisherman’s Association have both made it clear that they see it as obvious that for the first three months of 2019 we will remain part of the common fisheries policy but thereafter they seek bridging arrangements that will take them to end of the year, so that they might honour the arrangements that are made at the December Fisheries Council next year. That would then be the point at which we would properly exit the CFP. There is an elegant simplicity to that arrangement, and I hope that the Minister will confirm that that is the approach the Government will seek to pursue.

Fisheries management cannot continue as part of the CFP during any transitional period that follows after the end of March 2019 for one simple reason: we will not have a seat at the table when the decisions are made at the December Fisheries Council. I put that point to the Prime Minister at Prime Minister’s questions earlier this year, but she was less than clear in her answer—I realise that she perhaps does not have the background in fisheries of the Minister at the Dispatch Box today. I hope that he can confirm that that is the position and the Government will not leave us in a situation where our fishing industry is left having to abide by rules and decisions of which we have had no part in the making.

As the Shetland Fishermen’s Association put it to me in its briefing for today, “water and markets don’t mix”.

By that, it makes the point that the fishing industry and the fishing rights should not be traded off against other sectors. When it comes to the negotiations around our departure, will the Minister confirm that he will do as I have urged him on other occasions and ring-fence the fishing industry? There are plenty of good historical reasons why that should be done. No other coastal state is forced to trade access to waters for access to markets, and I say to the Minister that the fishermen in my constituency would see any arrangement of that sort as nothing short of a betrayal of the undertakings given to them at the time when they voted in the EU referendum.
Of course we will remain subject to a variety of different concerns as the Brexit process continues. We need to address the question of markets, because we can catch as many fish as we like but we have to be able to sell them to somewhere, so we will take a close interest in that part of the negotiations. We also need to address the issue of employment for crew members, some of whom come from within the EU, with many then working in the processing sector. That is where certainty needs to be given to the industry as early as possible. It simply is not going to work if we are left in the same position with crew members coming from outside the UK as we are currently left with visas for fishing crew coming from outwith the EU.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) on securing it. I associate myself with pretty much all of her comments, particularly those on the emergency and rescue services, which the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) also mentioned.

I want to express my gratitude to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland for his guarantee during Scottish questions yesterday that when we leave the EU we will leave the common fisheries policy. In turn, I want to be as helpful as possible to Ministers, but I am sure that the Minister will understand that I cannot and will not vote for any fisheries Bill or Brexit deal that does not advance the interests of the fishermen in my constituency.

I will talk more about Brexit later, because first I want to discuss a matter that needs urgent attention and about which we have already spoken to the Immigration Minister—namely, non-European economic area crew on the Scottish fleet. We are not talking about unskilled labour, which is often the perception; we are talking about fishermen who are experienced and qualified professionals. Like farming, with which I grew up, I think that fishing is a trade for which people need passion to make a real go of it. Also like farming, I think that it is something that people need to be born into. It is certainly something that many fishermen are born into, whether they happen to have been born in the coastal communities of Peterhead, Fraserburgh or Macduff in my constituency or, indeed, in the Philippines or further afield.

The industry recognises the need for a transition, so that it can be sustainable with regard to local labour, but that will take time, mainly because we need to undo the decades of damage done by top-down EU policies such as the CFP. It would be helpful and welcome if the Government would start by at least recognising the Scottish fleet’s need for non-EEA crew.

Of course, the Scottish fishing industry will be affected by Brexit. It is important that we agree how fisheries will be manged when we leave the CFP, and we will have those discussions when the fisheries Bill reaches the House. In the meantime, the key focus must be that we do take back control.

The Brexit negotiations are not the final negotiation for fishing. When we leave the EU, the United Kingdom will become an independent coastal state, so we must start thinking like one in our approach to future Brexit negotiations and in our annual negotiations with the other coastal states. As has been said, the December 2018 deal will apply to the UK only up until the third of March 2019. Like others, I am in favour of going into the 2018 discussions willing to accept a nine-month bridge to the end of 2019, but only if our own requirements are met. In the Brexit negotiations, we must not bargain away any concession of access to our waters. We are not talking about building a wall in the sea to keep out all foreign boats, but if we cannot restrict access to our waters and our demands are not met, we will end up with the weakest bargaining power of any independent state.

My hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall has mentioned the importance of zonal attachment. Aligning our fishing opportunities with zonal attachment involves two things—an increase of net inward quota exchanges, which we can negotiate annually, and making adjustments to the fixed quota shares, which is a longer-term process—but we cannot insist on either of them without being able to offer in return quota that the EU wants and periodic access to our waters. I reiterate that that access must be in our control and must not be traded away during Brexit negotiations.

Finally, in the short time I have left, I want to address devolution. I agree that those closest to the resource must have the most say and influence. We need grassroots policy making, not a top-down system like the CFP. I seek an assurance from the Minister that a UK framework, which is universally recognised as being required, will be developed between Westminster and the devolved Administrations and, more importantly, with the involvement of the relevant fish producer organisations.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): We have heard many times this afternoon about the importance of the fishing industry and the role it plays in the economic life of our coastal communities, including my Argyll and Bute constituency, where the industry—including the hugely significant shellfish industry—is one of the mainstays of our local economy. So I have a keen interest in the health and wellbeing and sustainability of the fishing industry and the seas that provide some of the finest seafood in the world.

It is easy to talk about the Scottish fishing industry as though it is one entity, but of course there are vast differences between the west and east coasts of Scotland. I want to highlight some of the challenges facing boat owners and skippers on the west coast.

What I am about to say will come as no great surprise, I suspect, as it is an issue that I have raised several times in my two and a half years in this place. I seek a relaxation of the Home Office rules to allow non-EEA crew members to work on vessels operating inside the 12-mile limit on the west coast. Unlike the east coast, where 12 miles is 12 miles, for the west coast’s islands and coastline, the 12 miles extends a vast distance out into the Atlantic—a distance that few inshore vessels can or will travel before reaching international waters. All vessels inside that limit have to be crewed by UK or EU citizens. In the current climate recruiting EU nationals to crew the boats is becoming increasingly problematic. More than ever, we need to employ non-EEA crew to fill the gap.
In 2015 and again in 2016, I joined a delegation of Northern Irish and west of Scotland boat owners, skippers, fish processors and Members to the Home Office to ask it to relax the ban on international seafarers being permitted to work in west coast Scottish waters. On both occasions, our appeals were rejected. We were told, “Use EU or UK crew.”

I am now hearing from skippers in Oban, including Jonathan McAllister, that because of Brexit and the reluctance of EU nationals to commit to working on the boats, an already dire recruitment situation is in danger of becoming catastrophic. He and many of his colleagues are now seriously contemplating walking away from the industry.

I understand that a more constructive meeting was recently held with the Home Office. I sincerely hope that the Minister for Immigration gave a flicker of encouragement that a solution could be found; otherwise the west of Scotland fishing community will be facing the perfect storm, being unable to attract our valued industry.

I cannot overstate just how serious the recruitment problems are on the west coast. Just as we need EU nationals to work in our schools, our hospitals, our high-tech industries and our fields, so we need them to work on our seas. We also need those highly trained, professional non-EEA international seafarers to fill the gaps in our fishing fleet. I hope that the Minister does what his predecessors singularly failed to do and comes up with a long-lasting solution to the problems on the west coast.

We have heard much about the deficiencies of the common fisheries policy. I will not defend the CFP, but the SNP has for the past 40 years been resolute in its criticism of it. I think it right to say that the SNP has been the only party that has been consistently and vocally opposed to the CFP. When back in 1983 the poster girl for the Brexiteers, Margaret Thatcher, was helping to create the CFP, it was left to Donald Stewart, the leader of the SNP, to speak against it. I can understand why that history makes Conservative Members uncomfortable.

I look forward to the day when an independent Scotland, as a member of the European Union, is able to help to shape a common fisheries policy that works for Scotland and all our neighbours.

3.44 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) on securing this debate.

Although we have such an event each December, this particular debate stands apart from those that have been held in the past 40 years. These debates normally focus on putting steel in the Minister’s backbone ahead of the EU Agriculture and Fisheries Council meeting. This year, as well as having that immediate task to perform, the Minister and the Secretary of State have before them a great opportunity, with the White Paper and the fishing Bill, to reset the framework within which this great industry operates. This provides a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to rejuvenate the East Anglian fishing industry, with Lowestoft in my constituency at its hub.

Lowestoft used to be the fishing capital of the southern North sea, but it has lost this title over the past 40 years, and East Anglia currently derives very little economic benefit from the fish stocks on its own doorstep, which are among the richest in Europe. The fisheries Bill must provide the policy framework within which the East Anglian industry can be revitalised. That means East Anglian boats having fair and equitable access to fisheries in all UK waters, but particularly the southern North sea. It requires supporting local infrastructure to be developed so that local communities and local people fully benefit from the fish that are landed in their ports. It needs a fisheries management system to be put in place in which local fishermen, scientists and the authorities collaborate in overseeing fisheries—a system that not only provides those working in the industry with a reasonable living, but ensures that the fisheries are passed on to the next generation in a better state.

At present, the East Anglian fleet is largely made up of under-10 metre boats that have access to a limited amount of fish to catch. This inequity and imbalance must be addressed. With the EU fleet today taking around four times more fish from UK waters than UK vessels take from EU waters, our departure from the EU means that it is likely that more fish will be available for UK fishermen to catch. But that will be of no benefit if we retain the existing system of allocation. The inshore fleet—the under-10s—need a fairer and larger slice of the cake. If the quota system is to be retained, there must be a significant reallocation.

It has been suggested that producer organisations will have a key role to play. If this is to be the case, the system needs to be reconstituted, as the Lowestoft PO has only six vessels, none of which lands fish in Lowestoft. There is some debate as to whether we should move to a new system of effort control, based on days at sea. If this is to be looked at again, Lowestoft could be a suitable pilot with the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science, which is based in the town, monitoring its impact.

To ensure that local people and businesses benefit from more fish being landed in Lowestoft than in other East Anglian ports, it is necessary to upgrade the local supporting infrastructure. This means safe berths and better landing points, and modern markets and upgraded freezer facilities. It involves strengthening the supply chain and providing new job opportunities for boat builders, repairers, chandlers, engineers, smokeries, merchants and mongers. June Mummery and Paul Lines, representing the local industry, have already met the Minister to outline their plans for securing this investment. I anticipate that it will be worked up locally in the coming months, and I will keep the Minister informed of progress, and seek his guidance and assistance where necessary.

The current fisheries management system must be overhauled. We must move away from the current policing system to a collaborative approach involving fishermen, authorities and scientists. With CEFAS in Lowestoft, there is the potential to put in place on the East Anglian coast a science-based, sustainable fishing system that can be an exemplar—a system that can be operated around the world and play an important role in sustaining the blue planet for the next generation.
3.49 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) on securing the debate and on her excellent work with the all-party fisheries group, of which she is chairman. I also echo her sentiments about the Fishermen’s Mission and its continued good work supporting fishermen and their families and local communities, particularly those in my constituency.

Mrs Sheryl Murray: I do not want to leave out my hon. Friend—the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn)—who is the joint chairman of the all-party parliamentary group.

Melanie Onn: A rare moment of cross-party agreement around fisheries. I thank the hon. Lady for those comments.

Today, I want to focus my remarks primarily on the processing side of the fisheries industry. However, before I get on to that, I want to mention the case of a former fisherman from my constituency. In the debate last year, I raised the case of James Greene, and the issue of fishermen missing out on their pensions unjustly, with subsequent Governments failing to properly compensate them for that. Sadly, James Greene passed away last year, but his widow is still waiting for his full entitlement from the fishermen’s compensation scheme. The ship he worked on for 20 years was wrongly omitted from the scheme’s list of eligible vessels. That list has been corrected, but the payments owed to James have still not been made in full.

I have been dealing with this matter through the parliamentary ombudsman, but the most recent correspondence I have had sight of says:

“The matters you have raised are not new as they were not in the scope of the investigation. We did not look at the department’s decision to pay for work on the Thessalonian at the reduced second scheme rate even though it had mistakenly been excluded under the first scheme...As the Ombudsman has already given this matter her personal attention earlier this year and with no new information provided, we would not look at this matter again.”

That is extremely disappointing. For the sake of his widow, for just £3,000—that is all we are talking about—and for the peace of mind of those at the Great Grimsby Association of Fishermen and Trawlermen, who have been fighting for decades for justice, will the Minister please meet me to see whether there is anything more that can be done to bring this matter to a satisfactory close?

The demise of the fishing industry since its peak in the middle of the 20th century has hit my town particularly hard. What we have seen in Grimsby is the transformation of the sector. While catching has severely diminished, in the way the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) discussed, we are now a hub for the processing, manufacturing, and packaging side of things. We have 75 food sites within a radius of a couple of miles, employing 5,000 people in landing the fish, selling it, smoking it or turning it into fish cakes.

This is necessarily an international industry. The fish caught off our coasts are often not the kind that people in Britain want to eat. Depending on where a catch is landed, the fish that ends up in Grimsby may have crossed the borders of three or four countries on its way to us. Some 270 tonnes of imported fish passes through our market every week, and these are perishable goods. Anything that makes trading harder could compromise the viability of the main source of employment in my constituency.

Mr Bradshaw: Do those potential obstacles to the frictionless trade my hon. Friend talks about include the loss of regulatory alignment, which is the topic of the week?

Melanie Onn: Yes. I will come on to regulatory alignment and the variance thereof.

I want to talk briefly about Norway, because it has been mentioned in the debate, and it is often cited as an example of how Britain’s fisheries sector could thrive outside the common fisheries policy. However, what is not mentioned is the effect Norway’s position has had on its seafood processing sector. By opting out of the CFP, Norway has had to accept losing market access in fisheries. According to the CBI, this trade-off has seen the majority of its seafood processing sector relocate to the EU, with Britain being a substantial winner from that situation. Under that agreement, Norway can sell fresh fish to EU countries with a minimal 2% tariff, but with 13% on processed fish.

Similarly, while we can currently buy fish from Norway and Iceland tariff-free, that may not be the case in just over a year’s time. The Minister must fight to ensure that this is not the outcome waiting for Britain after we leave the EU. It would be absolutely catastrophic for jobs and industry in Grimsby.

Mr Bradshaw: And it would mean more expensive fish and chips.

Melanie Onn: And more expensive fish and chips, as my right hon. Friend says.

I met the Minister with a delegation from Grimsby’s seafood processing sector last month to discuss ways to ensure that our ports and industry could continue to grow post Brexit, so I recognise that this issue is on his agenda. However, perhaps he could just update the House on what work he is doing to prepare the sector for the changes coming down the line.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): The fishing industry in my area, the south-west of Scotland, is very much lobster and langoustine-based. Eighty-six per cent. of that goes to Europe. T raining needs to be much more widely available if freedom of movement is no longer an option. It just goes to show how important it is, in all areas of the country and in all our coastal communities, that every effort is made to make sure that our local communities do not suffer as the outcome of Brexit becomes ever clearer.

About one in five of the industry’s skilled workforce comes from overseas. Training needs to be much more widely available if freedom of movement is no longer going to apply to this country after we leave the European Union. With that in mind, I invite the Minister to visit the fantastic Modal Training facility in my constituency, which provides training for maritime, port and marine workers. I hope that he will take me up on that offer to see the modern training methods that are being used to maintain these essential maritime skills.
3.55 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn). I am delighted that we were able to secure this debate through my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray).

Fishing is perhaps the oldest industry in all the south-west and it is deeply ingrained in the culture and heritage of my west Cornwall and Isles of Scilly constituency. Fishing and its supporting industries provide high-quality, skilled jobs that offer year-round employment—a vital factor in a part of the country where seasonal work often dominates.

EU fisheries policies have often seemed to ride rough-shod over the interests of the UK fishing fleet. That is perhaps why fishermen were one of the most vocally pro-Brexit groups in the country. I am sure that colleagues will agree, therefore, that leaving the EU presents a real opportunity for the Government to right some historical wrongs and build a sustainable and prosperous future for the UK fishing industry. I think that we can also agree that, as has been said, this will not be without its challenges. However, until we leave the EU, we are still bound by EU regulations, and I am glad to be able to speak in this debate today ahead of the annual EU Fisheries Council meeting in Brussels.

I have spoken to the Cornish Fish Producers Organisation, which is based in my constituency, has a membership of over 250 boats and is one of the largest fishermen’s organisations in the UK, and to other local fishermen about their key concerns for the future of fishing. Their message is clear. Fishermen want the UK fishing industry to regain control of access to UK waters out to the 200-mile limit. They want to be able to make use of funding opportunities and to have a regulatory regime determined by the UK Government, not the EU, that permits UK vessels to secure a greater share of total allowable catch.

With regard to the Commission’s proposals on Celtic sea cod, haddock and whiting, I have heard serious concerns expressed about their effect on all parts of the fleet in the south-west. The proposals show a lack of understanding of the dynamics of the ultra-mixed fisheries in this area—something that I know the Minister appreciates. I ask that he makes a case for mixed-fisheries-model analysis of these stocks to ensure that the Commission’s approach is science-led.

I would also like to highlight, as have others, concerns about the European Commission’s proposals on bass fishing for 2018, as clearly set out by my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann). The Commission’s proposals are based on an inadequate understanding of the bass fisheries, which now comprise, almost exclusively, unavoidable by-catch. Under the proposals, every bass caught in a gillnet, a beam trawl or a trawl will be discarded dead. The key to good fisheries management is to control total fishing mortality, but this fundamental principle seems to have escaped the Commission.

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, not least because I represent, I think, the most land-locked constituency of any Member in the Chamber at this time. However, my constituents enjoy eating fish and care about the marine environment and fish stocks. Does he agree with me, consumers, and myriad campaigning organisations such as the World Wildlife Fund, On The Hook and Greenpeace about the importance of transparency in labelling so that when consumers buy what they believe is sustainably fished fish, they can be confident that it is?

Derek Thomas: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and that has been quite successful, particularly in Newlyn. Newlyn bass is worth a premium in London simply because of clear and correct labelling.

The word ‘by-catch’ implies that it is unavoidable. The Commission is damaging fishermen’s integrity by implying that they are deliberately fishing their by-catch. At the same time, high domestic and continental demand make sea bass a valuable species, so chucking the already dead by-catch back seems senseless. I ask that more time be given to looking at the results of the measures introduced over recent years, which have led to a 70% reduction in landings from the commercial fleet. Steady rebuilding is the right way forward, but avoiding unnecessary discards must be a key part of the policy.

I mentioned earlier that I was grateful to have the Minister and Secretary of State on a visit to Newlyn harbour. The Minister was kind enough to have a Q and A session at the CFPO’s annual general meeting, and I make no apology for the thorough quizzing that CFPO members gave him on the future of their livelihood. I note that Councillor Adam Paynter, the leader of Cornwall Council, also accepted my invitation and visited Newlyn last month. I mention those visits, because the team at Newlyn Harbour have developed plans for much-needed investment, under which the harbour would offer a greater range of services and deliver the infrastructure needed to service a vibrant fishing fleet. Their aim is to support innovation, unlock potential within the local fishers and bring in necessary improvements to current infrastructure. That work is aimed at reinforcing Newlyn’s leading role in UK fisheries.

Newlyn is ideally located to serve export markets as well as premium UK markets such as London and elsewhere. It will be vital to secure public funding support for international hubs such as Newlyn as we navigate our way out of the EU. Such support will provide Newlyn with extra capacity for boats and enable it to offer better services, such as engineering and boat maintenance. Newlyn has the potential to expand its international enterprise.

The current funding systems do not adequately recognise the needs of the Cornish and wider fishing industries. Small fishing businesses in my constituency that do not have reliable cash flows struggle to capitalise on reimbursement-based grants. Businesses looking to undertake larger projects may look despairingly at their Scottish counterparts, who have long been able to use European regional development funding for ports and harbours, because Scotland negotiated a block exemption on state aid rules. Please, as we leave the EU and look to secure a sustainable fishing industry across the UK’s coastal towns, can we provide equal access to funds?

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Because there have been a number of interventions, I will have to reduce the time limit to four minutes after the next speaker, Ronnie Cowan.
4.2 pm

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I commend you on your good judgment, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I inform you that I will not be taking any interventions.

In Scotland, there is a great divide that has torn apart families and friends. It is not politics, religion or even football, but the age-old question: salt and vinegar, or salt and sauce? Unbelievably, some people prefer sauce with their fish and chips. That is all that most people need to consider. But how often do we stop and wonder: who caught that fish? What were the weather conditions? Who owns the boat? How much debt are they in? Will the bank lend to them? What sort of living do they make, and are they safe at sea? For generations, fishing families have braved the seas and oceans to put food on our plates, but they can continue to do so only if they and their fishing waters are protected.

Post Brexit, who decides? In the Faroe Islands, the fishing industry accounts for about 90% of total exports. The Danish Government have respected that and allowed the Faroes to negotiate their own treaties. As a result, the Faroese are thriving. That sort of thing is possible when one Parliament respects and trusts another. As we move closer to Brexit, will the UK respect and trust Scotland? Like those of the Faroe Islands, Scotland’s seas are vital. They are the fourth largest in the EU, and they are potentially the richest. On average, around four tonnes of fish are taken from each square nautical mile of Scottish waters, compared with around one tonne on average for EU waters. Neighbouring countries are highly dependent on Scotland’s waters for their landings. Germany and the rest of the UK land around 30% of their fishing catches, by weight, from Scottish waters.

If Scotland was a normal independent nation, we would negotiate directly with other countries to get the best possible deal for this key sector of our economy. Scottish fisherman will be looking to the future with trepidation over their funding and investment situation. We would be wise to look to Norway, where all parties involved in fisheries, regardless of size, have a seat around the table, where all are equally respected, and where fishermen, policy makers, politicians and managers all listen to each other in an atmosphere of equality. No sector dominates to the detriment of another.

I want to be clear that the SNP agrees that the common fisheries policy has been burdensome on the Scottish fishing industry. Ever since 1983, when it was debated in the House, we have consistently opposed the policy, as was mentioned earlier. We understand that, although every voting area in Scotland voted to remain in the EU, many Scottish fishermen undoubtedly voted to leave and to “take back control”. What does taking back control look like for the Scottish fishing industry?

HSBC estimates that the overall loss of access to the single market will initially cost the industry £42 million a year. Over a quarter of crew in the Scottish fishing fleet are non-UK nationals, yet European workers still do not have clarity regarding their working rights. As my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) mentioned, a recruitment crisis is looming. We also require access to EU markets: 86% of all the west coast of Scotland’s shellfish currently goes to the EU. This has to continue somehow. New markets in the far east can be pursued long term, but core markets must be preserved.

Finally, it is not just livelihoods at risk, but lives. While we are restructuring our fishing industries, we must give our fishermen the security of a coastguard capable of reacting to emergencies. The loss of fishing vessels such as the Louisa and the mistakes being made cannot be ignored. We should see this period as an opportunity to do things better. Will the Minister seek to develop a fair allocation of quota, provide improved training for domestic fishermen, create fair and flexible fisheries access and management for inshore fleets, and regenerate our coastal fleets and the associated facilities around the coast? We have this opportunity now and must act now.

4.7 pm

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I wish to start by paying tribute to Sean Hunter, a Brixham fisherman who sadly lost his life in the past week. He was deeply loved by his family and the whole community, and I know that the House will want to join me in sending our deepest condolences to his family.

I also pay tribute to the Fishermen’s Mission, which does much to support fishermen, their families and our wider communities, and join other Members in paying tribute to the coastguard, the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, the National Coastwatch Institution and all the emergency services for their professionalism and courage. Most of all, however, I want to thank the fishers themselves, who do so much, in such challenging conditions, to put food on our plates and bring so much to our national and local economies. The value of the catch to the UK economy in 2016 was £936 million.

I am also delighted to say that Brixham has again been voted the No. 1 fishing port in the UK, landing the most valuable catch in England. In excess of £30 million has been sold through Brixham fish market in the last year, and that is providing jobs not just at sea but in the processing sector on land. We recognise the value of all those jobs.

I also pay tribute to the responsible actions of our fishers, who have done much in responding to scientific advice to improve the sustainability of many of our species. However, just as we expect our fishers to respond to that scientific advice and reduce the total allowable catch, in many cases, so I would ask the Minister to respond and recognise that we expect fairness when the scientific data shows we are fishing sustainably. In his negotiations, in which I wish him well, will he therefore look at the sole quotas in VIlId and VIlE? There is a very strong case for their being increased further.

We need to look again at the value of the scientific evidence on which the quotas are based. In responding to the debate, will the Minister listen to the concerns of fishermen who are asking for greater access to fisheries science partnerships in co-operation with CEFAS? I am concerned to hear that too often these requests are turned down. For some years, the UK has agreed to adhere to the data collection framework, so it is of great concern to hear that the sprat stock, for example, is still described as “Data Deficient”. In his response, will the Minister say what is going to happen about that in future?

Several colleagues have raised the issues of bass fisheries. As time is short, I will not dwell on them, except perhaps to thank the Devon and Severn inshore fisheries and conservation authority for meeting me to discuss
the wrasse fisheries, and to hold that up as an example of where responsible but proportionate precautionary principles are being applied.

In my closing moments, I say to the Minister that as we now move to thinking about where we are with Brexit and beyond, fishing communities want to see fairness. We recognise that we need to avoid falling into an acrimonious Brexit, but to maintain good relations in order to trade with our neighbours in the future. I just hope that he will make sure that our fishing communities are not let down, as they were in 1973.

4.10 pm

**Luke Pollard** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It is a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), and I congratulate my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray), on securing the debate.

At the beginning of every fisheries debate, it is right that we praise the amazing charities that provide rescue and support for the fishing industry, such as the RNLI, the coastguard and the Fishermen’s Mission. Today I want to pay special tribute to Tony Jones—a respected fisherman of many years who is missed not only by the fishing community in Plymouth, but around the country—who died when the Solstice trawler was lost at sea off Plymouth recently. Our thoughts remain with his family, and with Nick and Chris, who survived that quick capsize.

I want to pass on special thanks to the RNLI crews from Plymouth, Looe and Salcombe who reacted so quickly in searching for the vessel. It might be useful for hon. Members who do not follow their local RNLI on Twitter to search out the #outronashout Twitter feed, which tweets every time an RNLI lifeboat launches, because they will be amazed at just how many times those brave volunteers go to sea to save lives.

We must do more to protect and secure safety at sea, which means matching our words with actions. I am very grateful to the Minister for Transport Legislation and Maritime for the action he secured following the possible delay to lifeboat tasking after the sinking of the Solstice. He said that there would be “no stone left unturned”, and so far he has been true to his word. I am also grateful to the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil), an SNP Member, for his support after the sinking of the Solstice, including through sharing his experience of the sinking of the Louisa from his constituency.

The proper investigations are under way and it is not right to prejudge them, but I know that areas in which there can be improved tasking of lifeboats have already been identified by the coastguard. I hope that they will be put in place so that lives can be saved more quickly at sea. This is not a partisan request, because I believe there is cross-party support for ensuring that safety at sea is put ahead of any political considerations. In the meantime, I have asked the coastguard to do all it can to rebuild the Plymouth fishing industry’s confidence in knowing that the coastguard will take action in the event of a disaster or a trawler going missing.

Fishing is a really important industry for Plymouth. We have a vibrant fishing community that we want to strengthen in the years ahead. It is vital not only that we campaign for the right Brexit deal to protect our fisheries, as has been mentioned, but that fishing infrastructure around the country is protected. In particular, that means not building luxury flats on the fishing quay in Plymouth, therefore ensuring that there is protection for the fishing industry for many years to come. Plymouth also needs a new state-of-the-art fish market, and I hope the Government will look at how investments can be secured to ensure that, in whatever port around the country, Britain’s fishing industry can access the very best of technologies and facilities to ensure its success for many years.

I am proud that Plymouth is leading the way towards blue belting, following the example set in “Blue Planet II”, in securing the first national marine park, which I hope will be designated in Plymouth sound. The scheme has cross-party support, as well as the support of world-class institutions based in Plymouth including, among many others, the Plymouth Marine Laboratory and the National Marine Aquarium.

Finally, I want to heap praise on the fantastic work of Plymouth City Council in its Plymouth lifejackets campaign. Some 120 personal flotation devices, equipped with locator beacons, have now been given out to those in the fishing industry in Plymouth. This has been supported by a £77,000 grant from the European maritime and fisheries fund and the MMO. As one RNLI coxswain put it, this is designed to take the search out of search and rescue.

At this time, the House has an awful lot to be proud of in the fishing industry. Knowing how dangerous fishing is, we should heap praise on those involved for all the work that they do.

4.14 pm

**Andrew Bowie** (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): Although my constituency contains 31 miles of magnificent North sea coastline, it does not have much of a fishing industry—certainly not as much as the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid). However, I thought it was important that I speak in today’s debate on the eve of the Fisherseries Council that will set quotas for all European fishing fleets. In a previous life, I had the great privilege to work for just over a year in the European Parliament for Ian Duncan, now Lord Duncan, who was the Conservative spokesperson on fisheries. One could not find a bigger advocate for the industry.

I quickly learned that someone enters the world of fishing unprepared at their peril. More importantly, I learned about the skill, dedication and ingenuity of British and Scottish fishermen and the wider industry, and of the producer organisations of the Scottish White Fish Producers Association with Mike Park, the Scottish Pelagic Fishermen’s Association with Ian Gatt, the Shetland Fishermen’s Association with Simon Collins, and the Scottish Fishermen’s Federation with Bertie Armstrong. Faced with overwhelming regulation, bans, recovery plans, and a bureaucratic sea of red tape that would test any industry, they have adapted and overcome. It is through their work and actions, not the words of politicians and civil servants at the Berlaymont or Rue Wiertz, that we are seeing record landings at Peterhead. Amazingly, this year North sea cod has been recertified as sustainable.

We are having the debate because of next week’s Council in Brussels. In reality, as the Minister is well aware, the big decisions have already been taken at the EU-Faroes and EU-Norway negotiations. On the whole, it has been quite a positive year for the Scottish fishing fleet.
I pay tribute to those unsung allies and supporters of the industry in Brussels who have fought the good fight over the years in trialogues, at the European Parliament Committee on Fisheries and at various Councils. Right now this is an uncertain time for them as we prepare to leave the European Union. As we speak, they are working hard to defend British interests as regulations that will affect the British fishing industry, such as the extension of the North sea plan, continue to be made.

We wish every success at Council next week to my hon. Friend the Minister, those at UKRep, all British staff at the Commission, and Caroline Healy at the secretariat of the European Conservatives and Reformists group. She works with the industry day in, day out, to defend it and give it a voice at the heart of the EU. For all the work that has been done for the fishing industry during our membership of the CFP, and for all the work still being done, I say thank you. Through the work of those individuals and their predecessors, the industry is in a strong position as we set sail into the sea of opportunity that is a post-CFP world.

4.17 pm

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): As a member of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, and in recognition of its ongoing inquiry on fisheries, I thought it pertinent that I say a few words.

The opposition to the CFP is obvious, but we cannot forget that it was the Ted Heath Tory Government who deemed that Scottish fishermen were expendable in the wider UK interest. Back then there were 23 Scottish Tory MPs, yet we are now meant to believe that the new baker’s dozen will somehow hold this Government to account.

There is no doubt that everybody appreciates how critical fishing is to coastal communities, but in the bigger picture it accounts for only 0.1% of GDP. With successive Governments in thrall to the London’s financial sector and house prices, what will be the overall Government priorities? How can we believe guarantees from the fisheries Minister that there will be separation and ring-fencing of fishing access.

UNCLOS will be the post-Brexit fallback, but it also allows historical rights to be taken into account. There therefore must be discussions on the subject, but given that the UK Government have already allowed 18 months to pass without even closing preliminary discussions with the EU, they will have to up their game over the next 15 months.

The prize is control over the waters and management of the stock in a sustainable way. In the same vein, Scotland must have control over its waters. Ours are the fourth largest in Europe—they account for 60% of the UK’s waters, and 38% of current EU allowable catch. Scotland is therefore critical to the overall process. It is fine to argue for an overall UK framework, but that must be agreed with the devolved nations, not imposed on them.

These concerns are echoed by the Scottish Fishermen’s Federation, which wants all EU powers devolved straight to Edinburgh, because it trusts the Scottish Government. Scotland also needs to be allocated budgets that are currently accessed via the EU, such as that from the European maritime and fisheries fund. Even that funding is proof of the low priority that the UK Government give this and their weakness in negotiations with the EU.

The forthcoming fisheries paper needs to flesh out a lot of things, so I hope that we will hear from the Minister about it. What will the quota management system be based on? We cannot continue a system that sees some of Scotland’s quotas traded, such as for blue whiting, or the top-slicing of The Hague preference quota, which has seen Scotland lose out on over 1,000 tonnes of whiting over the past five years. The UK Government really need to publish and implement the new fisheries concordat that was agreed by Ministers in August 2016. The Environment Secretary needs to ensure that licencing starts to eliminate the “slipper skippers”. If people cannot afford or access quota licences, the perceived opportunities for job creation will be lost. Quota hopping also needs to be addressed.

Problems might arise with trade tariffs if access to the single market is not maintained. As we have heard, the cost to the sector of leaving the single market is estimated at £42 million. A customs agreement is clearly vital for such special products with a limited lifespan.

How will the EEZ be policed? What will transition periods look like? Bertie Armstrong of the Scottish Fishermen’s Federation advises that a nine-month transitional or bridging period is required. Meanwhile, the Secretary of State talks about leaving the CFP early, or on day one, but that is at odds with what fishermen say is required. There will be opportunities, but the UK Government must up their game and need to start giving out better information.

4.21 pm

**Stephen Kerr** (Stirling) (Con): I would like to take the opportunity of this debate on the fishing industry, using the broad definition of that industry as the commercial activity of harvesting, processing and marketing aquatic produce for human consumption, to make a positive request of the Minister. Since 1995, the amount of caught fish in the world has been flatlining, but the amount of fish used for food has continued to grow and outpace global population growth. The gap is being filled by the miracle of aquaculture.

Forty years ago, 93% of seafood came from capture fisheries—trawlers and traditional fishing—and only 7% came from global aquaculture. Today, however, more than 50% of the world’s seafood comes from aquaculture and that figure is only going to rise. The number of aquaculture-produced fish is staggering. Today, more than 50% of globally consumed fish is being produced on fish farms. As of 2014, that is equivalent to 73.8 million tonnes of fish, which equivalent in weight to 377 jumbo jets. That, Madam Deputy Speaker, is a lot of fish. It makes a huge contribution to feeding the world’s population. Aquaculture provides a highly efficient source of animal protein for human consumption and is critical to future food security for the rapidly increasing global population.

It will come as no surprise to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, to hear a Scottish Member talk about Scottish food as being the best in the world. Our salmon, born and bred in Scottish waters, is second to none. The growth of aquaculture has allowed this industry to thrive. In 2016, we found 13.7 million salmon in Scotland. According to a DEFRA-commissioned report that was
published in July 2017, 85% of the volume of farmed fish and shellfish grown in the UK is produced in Scotland, and 92% of the value of UK aquaculture is produced in Scotland. According to a report commissioned and published this year by the Highlands and Islands Enterprise, the aquaculture supply chain in Scotland employs over 12,000 people. According to the Food and Drink Federation, so far in 2017, salmon alone is the UK’s No. 1 food export.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman understand that one reason why the SNP is calling for Scotland to remain in the single market and the customs union is precisely so that we do not have prime salmon backed-up at customs checkpoints?

Stephen Kerr: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. We certainly do not want that, because the value of salmon to the UK economy is close to the value of the entire landings of all species of fish by UK vessels in capture fisheries. We want that to increase.

If a barrel of oil is worth $50, the equivalent value of a barrel of salmon is more than $1,200. That is why the Norwegian Government’s national policy is that aquaculture is the sustainable industry for when oil runs out. The industry is already estimated to be worth £1.8 billion to the Scottish economy, but we must go for growth. The Scottish national marine plan has a target of increasing production from the current level of 170,000 tonnes to 210,000 tonnes in the coming year. That can be achieved if we focus on productivity, and we can best do that by focusing on the cutting-edge science involved in food production.

That brings me back to my constituency of Stirling. The Institute of Aquaculture and Global Aquatic Food Security is based at Stirling University, as is the Scottish Aquaculture Innovation Centre. They work together to develop vaccines, cultivation methods and productivity techniques that have had an impact in countries all over the world, including Scotland and the United Kingdom as a whole. With the help of the centre, we can increase productivity in our domestic industry and do our bit to develop a global industry that will ultimately feed the world, which must be a very worthy objective.

Now I come to my request to the Minister. A very important part of the Stirling city region deal is investment in the infrastructure of the Institute of Aquaculture and Global Aquatic Food Security and the Scottish Aquaculture Innovation Centre. May I press the Minister to help me to secure a £20 million investment as part of the deal? That will serve as an ignition point for millions of pounds of private investment in the industry, with a potential prize of an additional £254 million in increased gross value, more than 3,000 new jobs, and more than £690 million in additional sales. The ambition is very clear. The institute says:

“We are determined that Scotland and the UK remain at the forefront of global aquaculture and that we do not lose the potential for high value employment and sustainable economic growth through innovation and enterprise in aquatic food production.”

We have created a bold vision for the development of our aquaculture infrastructure, ensuring that we can match current and future industry needs. This development is underpinned by a scientific strategy that will ensure that Stirling remains synonymous with excellence in aquaculture.”

I ask the Minister to help me to secure the money, so that we can make that a reality.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): I hoped to make a wide-ranging speech about the practical and policy dangers that face the Welsh fishing industry, but instead I shall concentrate on just three issues. First, I shall set out the unique nature and structure of the Welsh commercial fishing industry. Secondly, I shall highlight some of the concerns that have been raised with me about the UK Government’s trade policies. Finally, I shall implore the Government to give coastal communities, and fishermen and women throughout Wales, the tangible assurances that they deserve.

The Welsh fishing fleet, which consists of approximately 400 vessels, operates in some of the most challenging environments. Not only does it face hostile sea conditions, but it must operate within a low quota of 100 tonnes a year for fish covered by the total allowable catch regulations. The adaptable and hardy Welsh fishing industry has adapted to those conditions, focusing much of its attention on non-TAC species including sea bass, about which we have heard a great deal this afternoon, and significant amounts of shellfish, but it walks a fine line. One fisherman told me that his family lived hand to mouth, not knowing from one month to the next whether they would be able to meet their financial obligations.

The Welsh Fishermen’s Association has drawn my attention to some striking analysis which underlines the precariousness of the Welsh fishing fleet’s position. If there were a mere four weeks of delays in our current trading relationships, the Welsh fishing fleet would be in danger of collapse, and a delay of six weeks would cause catastrophic business failures throughout the sector. That takes me to my next point: the trade issues that are at the forefront of Welsh fishermen’s minds.

Our small-scale fleet trades widely in a dynamic market of live and therefore perishable products. Tariff barriers will of course have a huge impact on their viability, but, as we heard from the right hon. Member for Tynemouth (Mr Campbell), non-tariff barriers could be just as devastating, if not more so. Trade in live or fresh food produce is a tricky business at the best of times, but customs checks and additional delays in the process of trade will cause the value of the produce to deteriorate, which will render trade unviable and, in certain circumstances, impossible. By gambling away our existing trade relationship with the EU, we risk the creation of customs checks and a raft of non-tariff barriers. Empty rhetoric about “frictionless trade” is meaningless to the coastal communities who are peering over the edge of the hard-Brexit cliff that the Government have created.

I will not apologise for repeating, once again, a simple solution to the problem: retaining membership of the customs union and the single market. If the Welsh fishing industry is decimated, as it might well be if the Government carry on as they are, investment will be drained from coastal communities such as those in Ceredigion. They are already hard hit, and this money is unlikely to return to them.

I urge the UK Government to reconsider their position on the customs union and single market, as that would safeguard the viability of the Welsh fishing industry. I also echo the remarks of the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan): the UK Government’s pursuit of future markets and trade deals must not come at the expense of today’s fishing fleet. A fisherman I spoke to asked a
disarmingly simple but extremely pertinent question: “There may be opportunities somewhere in the intangible distance, but if there is no fleet left by the time we get there, what is the point?”

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Yesterday my colleague the hon. Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson) and the former Minister for Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in Northern Ireland met the Minister to discuss the forthcoming meetings. It is always good to see the Minister in his place; he is a friend of the fishermen and there is no better person to speak on our behalf in this Chamber.

The National Federation of Fishermen’s Organisations has a five-step plan. I do not have time to go into that in detail, but the federation mentions in its brief:

“A house divided amongst itself will fall.”

This House today is united: all parties and Members are working together behind our Minister.

While the devolution of fishing is necessary for the fine-tuning of everyday issues, there is also a wish among the industry for pragmatism and, where appropriate, maintaining a United Kingdom-wide policy framework, particularly on licensing and the trade of quota. It does not serve the Northern Ireland, Scottish, English or Welsh fishing industries well when barriers in the form of temporary moratoriums are erected around the transfer of quota units within the United Kingdom or restrictions are placed on the port of registration of licensing administration.

A confusing picture is emanating from Ireland, typified by evidence provided by Irish fishing industry representatives to the Irish Parliament’s Brexit Committee during a hearing on 24 January 2017. During that session, contributors stated that up to 70% of mackerel and nephrops annually caught by Ireland’s fishing fleet was taken from UK waters. It seems it was all right for them and other EU fishermen to draw a blank fisheries cheque from UK waters, but not for others to draw such cheques from Irish waters. I put that marker down, to go on the record in Hansard.

Northern Ireland fishermen are looking east to the rest of the UK for their future, not to the south, and certainly not to the EU. They expect that the wrongs imposed on them by the common fisheries policy, typified by the application of the Hague preference quota regime, will be righted. For our fishermen, removal of the preference is a red line.

It may be convenient for the Irish Government to blame the UK’s withdrawal from this convention as a reason for not progressing their Sea-Fisheries (Amendment) Bill, but the fact is that their minds were made up beforehand to erect a hard border against fishermen from Northern Ireland, as a tactic to secure future access arrangements for the Irish fleet to British waters, on which, as mentioned, they heavily depend. It is with regret that we conclude the time has come to withdraw from the voisinage agreement, and we urge the Minister to act on this matter soon.

The Minister is well-versed on the issues surrounding the need for non-UK crew. The Department for Communities in Northern Ireland ran a recruitment drive for 150 crew for local fishing vessels. There were 30 expressions of interest in the positions from across the EU. Some 19 candidates were invited to interview, and only six attended for interview, with five of them being offered positions after sea survival training. So 145 places are left in Northern Ireland. I commend the hon. Members for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) and for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid), who have spoken on this matter. The process we have is not working, and we need to do more on this.

I ask the Minister also to remember the long-term cod management plan and ensure that the sea cod TAC is kept for us and increased across Northern Ireland. I also stress the importance of nephrops to my constituency of Strangford and the villages and fishermen of Portavogie, Ardglass and Kilkeel.

These are key stocks for Northern Ireland, as well as the Minister’s constituents in the south-west of England, yet it seems that, against a background of much better news from the Irish sea, the European Commission continues to find something to create discontent and upset. This kind of arm-twisting is unacceptable. There will be a better future for our fishermen, and the December 2017 Agriculture and Fisheries Council should offer a first step in that direction.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): This is the first time that I have taken part in the annual fishing debate, and I am delighted to have this opportunity to sum up for the Scottish National party. Although I was born in Aberdeen and have lived most of my life there, before I was five I lived in Gamrie, which is also known as Gardenstown, near Banff in the north-east of Scotland. That little community has historically been dominated by fishing and continues to be so to this day. My great-great-grandfather, John Murray, was killed while fishing, at the age of 34, during the first world war. My grandfather—my “grandad”—John West, was the skipper of the Banff-registered May Lily, a 70-foot trawler that went out from Gamrie. He skippered that vessel from 1968 to 1975, having been on it for a number of years before that. The fishing history is strong in my family, particularly on my dad’s side.

It was a very different landscape back then; people had very different attitudes. The boats were much smaller, and people stayed on one fishing boat for much longer than they perhaps do nowadays. Things have moved quite significantly, particularly since the 1970s, but even in recent years there has been a significant change. One of the big changes in recent years has been the increase in sustainability. The hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) mentioned cod stocks, and the reason for the increase in sustainability is the better management of the fishing stocks. We are able to look at this scientifically and sustainably to ensure that the stocks continue to grow so that we can ensure the future of the fishing industry for the long term in the north-east of Scotland and across the rest of the United Kingdom. In the UK, 65% of the tonnage of fish landed by UK vessels is landed by Scottish vessels. Over 50% of all fishing jobs in the UK are in Scotland, as are 56% of the jobs involved in going out fishing, rather than in the processing side.

The SNP has regularly raised a number of concerns about the way in which the UK deals with fishing. The deficiencies of the common fisheries policy have been
raised by my colleagues and by other Members across the House today, but we have particular concerns about the way in which the UK decides to divvy up the quotas. The North sea whiting top-slice continues to be a major concern to us. Allowing English coastal communities to have more for their 10-metre-and-under inshore vessels is disadvantaging Scottish fishermen. The Scottish Government have been absolutely consistent in their criticism of that policy, and we will continue to be so.

Another thing that my colleagues have mentioned is the UK’s swap package, particularly in relation to blue whiting. That continues to be a concern for us as well. We cannot be swapping with Norway and not getting back what our fishermen fish. We have been consistent in our criticism of the way in which the UK Government have prioritised the fishing industry. It is incredibly important in the north-east of Scotland. It is not that we want to see less priority being given to fishermen in English coastal communities; we want to see more priority given to those who are trawling for white fish in particular in the north-east of Scotland and across the whole of Scotland. That is another major concern.

A number of Members have talked about Brexit. I want to mention the new port and the refurbishments that have been done at the port in Peterhead. More than £5 million of the money that went into the new port came from the European Union, and a further £6 million came from the Scottish Government to improve the port at Peterhead. I understand that the new fish market is under way, and is looking very positive. However, that could not have been done in the same format without the European money that we have received, and we would like some clarity from the Minister as to what will replace it. What will he do to ensure that our fishing industry is fit for the future, particularly in relation to the critical infrastructure that is needed? Peterhead is an amazing port that lands a significant proportion of the fish that is landed across the United Kingdom, and we need to ensure that we can continue to have the curve on them.

In more Brexit-related issues, the hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray), who introduced the debate, talked specifically about trading with France, but few people seem to realise how much we export to France, which is the destination for 27.5% of our fish exports. It is therefore incredibly important for our fish processors and fishermen and for everybody involved in the fishing industry that we have a trade deal with France, and therefore the whole European Union, that allows us to export that amount with few hold-ups at customs and that does not have the 7% to 11% tariffs that we would see under WTO rules, which would be a major problem. As has been mentioned already, leaving the single market will cost the industry about £42 million, which is an incredible amount of money.

My last point is about the Government’s prioritisation of looking at the industries that will be hit by Brexit. I am unsure of their level of prioritisation, but the little prioritisation that they are doing seems to be concentrated on industries that offer a particularly high tax take for the Treasury, such as the finance and car industries. I want them to look a little more at the communities that will be decimated by the loss of a certain industry, such as fishing, and to prioritise on that basis as well.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): We have had an excellent debate this afternoon ahead of the annual December Agriculture and Fisheries Council meeting. I start by thanking all those who have taken part in this thoughtful and considered discussion, which saw representations that reflect the diverse fishing activity that is happening all over our country. I pay particular tribute to the hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray), who secured this debate, for her characteristically insightful speech—I know that this policy area is close to her heart. I echo the sentiments of my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), because there have been tragedies at sea since last year’s debate. I send our thoughts to those who have lost loved ones and to those who have been injured at sea, particularly the friends and family of the crew of the fishing vessel Solstice. I ask the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) to send our condolences back to her constituency following the tragedy that she shared with us. I join all those who paid tribute to the RNLI for its incredible work and to organisations, including the Fishermen’s Mission, who do so much to support the wellbeing of not only those who spend their lives fishing at sea, but their families.

In anticipation of this debate, I looked back in Hansard at last year’s discussion. This is the second fisheries debate since the referendum, yet many of the questions that hon. Members from across the House were asking in December 2016 are still being asked a year on. In the past 12 months, we do not seem to have moved any closer to clarity on what a post-Brexit fisheries policy will mean for our fishing communities up and down the country. While there is diversity and robust adaptability within the UK fishing fleet, which have allowed it to weather both rough seas and changing political landscapes, people’s fears about and aspirations for a post-Brexit policy depend on where they are in the country and what is being fished. Last week, the Labour party launched a consultation on fishing ahead of the upcoming fisheries Bill, which was announced in the Queen’s Speech, to ensure that those with an interest can have a say in that process, and I am looking forward to going through those submissions.

The rhetoric of the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has driven expectations for a significant uplift in economic activity in the fishing sector, which we are all keen to see, so the challenge now is how and when he proposes to deliver it. I hope the Minister can update the House today on what progress has been made to prepare the UK to become an independent coastal state and on where fishing currently features in the Brexit negotiations. When this country leaves the EU in March 2019, what will be the framework for agreeing the total allowable catches as a means of managing fish stocks that we share with neighbouring countries? Despite his tough taking-back-control narrative, the Secretary of State apparently told the Danish market back in August that “boats from EU countries will still be able to operate in UK waters after Brexit, as the UK does not have enough capacity to catch and process all its fish alone.”

Like most of the fishing industry, I am keen to see the evidence upon which he based that policy decision. Will the Minister explain to us how that system would
be managed, who would have access to our waters, and what the mechanism will be for agreeing allocations of quota to vessels from the rest of the EU?

In addition to the question of our waters and access, the other area of uncertainty for the fishing industry is trade, which has come up many times today. Although the level of dependence on the European market varies by sector, up to 85% of our crab, lobster and prawns are sold into Europe. We will need the freest possible trade with our neighbours if we are to satisfy the demand from European consumers for our top-quality shellfish. The point has already been made—including in the excellent speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), who represents a constituency with a thriving fish processing sector—that, when dealing with fresh produce, financial barriers are not the only challenge, and ensuring there are no delays that could compromise the smooth and timely movement of fish across borders will be essential if we are to maintain our existing routes to markets outside the UK.

That was made clear to me when I met fishermen in North Shields with my right hon. Friend the Member for Tynemouth (Mr Campbell), who represented his local fishing community admirably this afternoon. I thank him for his kind remarks, which were certainly kinder than the remarks I heard when I worked under him in the Opposition Whips Office.

It is reassuring that there is firm common ground between the fishing industry, conservationists, recreational fishers and consumers alike that a sustainable approach to a new fishing policy is the only game in town. For a sustainable approach to work, we need two things: we have to get the science right if we are to have confidence in managing fish stocks responsibly; and we have to have a means of robustly enforcing that approach. With that in mind, I am concerned to see that the number of fishing vessels inspected by the fishery protection squadron has fallen from 1,400 in 2011-12 to just 278 in 2016-17. Does the Minister agree that, for all the technological developments, which I certainly welcome, the ability to board a vessel and inspect the operations on board will be essential if we are to manage fish stocks sustainably? I hope the Minister will indicate how he envisions the future of fisheries enforcement to work post-Brexit and confirm that the fishery protection squadron will be resourced to carry out its objectives effectively.

Another issue that came up time and again as I visited coastal towns is the failure to attract the next generation into fishing. If we are to capitalise on an increased quota that drives economic activity and job creation in our coastal towns, we will need a new approach to training. The Whitby fishing school explained to me some of the difficulties of securing funding for courses. The school finds it incredibly difficult to deliver courses that both truly equip young people to work at sea and tick the relevant boxes to secure funding for that training, so it has asked the Government to reflect on whether the framework in place for delivering apprenticeships and training programmes is fit for purpose in attracting and retaining the fisherman and women of tomorrow.

On funding and infrastructure, the European maritime and fisheries fund has facilitated crucial strategic investment that has helped to support jobs and promote sustainability. For the benefit of those planning bids for investment in their area over the coming years, such as the fish quay in North Shields, will the Minister provide further information on the plans in place for replacing the fund? I am keen to hear his response to the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) on infrastructure to support aquaculture.

On conservation, there is renewed public awareness of the need for action to preserve our marine environment as a result of David Attenborough’s “Blue Planet II”, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) said in his powerful speech—my right hon. Friend has always used his experience to be a real champion of responsible fish management. More than 10 million people are tuning in to watch every week and, as anyone who has seen the show will appreciate, there could be no better showcase for our marine life, demonstrating just how visually stunning yet incredibly vulnerable it is.

We are proud of our record in government, and of introducing the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009. We included bold commitments in our manifesto ahead of this year’s general election. The Minister will be aware of the blue belt pledges, which include the goals of establishing a marine protected area around the South Sandwich Islands in 2018 and of delivering on the commitment to establish a fully protected area in at least 50% of Ascension Island’s waters in 2019. I hope he will reaffirm his commitment to conservation and express Government support for such an initiative.

Marine protection and fisheries management are two sides of the same coin. If we get it right and set the standard both domestically and in our waters around the world, we can secure a flourishing marine environment and a strong and profitable fisheries sector. It is fair to say that the need for certainty from the Government is a theme that has run throughout the contributions today. On many of the biggest questions faced by the fisheries sector, although hopes are certainly high, we are still in the dark on much of the detail. There are plenty of opportunities for our fishermen and women and those in related sectors as we leave the EU, but what we desperately need to see from this Government is the roadmap outlining just how we deliver on them.

That having been said, may I take this opportunity to wish the Minister all the very best for the upcoming Council meeting? We all have an vested interest in it going well and we all have our fingers crossed that he is a better negotiator with our European neighbours than perhaps some of his colleagues.

4.49 pm

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): I thank the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) for her good wishes for us at the upcoming negotiations. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) and the all-party group on fisheries on securing this annual debate. It takes place at a crucial time, because every year in November and December we have a series of important fisheries negotiations, and this will be the fifth year I attend the December Fisheries Council. It is also crucial because of the context: the fact that we are leaving the EU and working on future domestic fisheries policy, as a number of hon. Members have pointed out.
Fishing, aquaculture and fish processing is an incredibly important industry for this country, contributing £1.5 billion to our economy and employing 33,000 people. My hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) pointed out the great potential for aquaculture, and we have seen some fantastic results in the Scottish salmon industry—this is one of our great exports. I am more than happy to meet him to discuss his thoughts and proposals to take that forward in his constituency. The catching sector is also vital to many of our coastal communities, as the sheer number of contributions we have heard today attests. We have heard contributions from Members from Northern Ireland, Cornwall, Wales, Scotland and the east coast, and from those on the channel. We have heard from Members from right around our country—[Interruption.] Sorry, have I missed one?


George Eustice: And Devon—we always miss out Devon and Cornwall, as the hon. Gentleman knows. This industry has vital significance to our coastal communities, but we also know that this is a dangerous occupation. My hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall suffered a very personal tragedy in this regard, and I pay tribute to the work she has done since on issues such as marine safety. In 2017, five fishermen lost their lives, and our thoughts are with all those families affected.

In today’s debate, we have heard some personal accounts of people who have experienced tragedy in their own constituencies, including from the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), the right hon. Member for Tynemouth (Mr Campbell), who talked about a memorial in his constituency, and the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), who gave a personal account of one of her ancestors who suffered a tragedy in this area.

I turn now to this year’s negotiations. The first thing to note, as my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) pointed out, is that a series of negotiations take place at this time of year. For Scotland, and for constituencies such as Orkney and Shetland, and Banff and Buchan, the negotiations that really matter, perhaps more than any other, are the annual EU-Norway bilateral negotiations. This year, we have seen some positive outcomes from those negotiations, which concluded in Bergen last week.

This year, we have seen some fantastic results in the Scottish salmon industry. As several hon. Members pointed out, we anticipate that bass will again be a controversial issue this year. Three years ago, as Fisheries Minister, I pushed for urgent measures to limit the catches of bass to maintain healthy stocks. We secured that and I have tried since to ensure that the Commission gets the balance right between the actions it takes on recreational anglers and those they take on commercial fishing. We argued last year that there should be a lower catch limit for the hook-and-line commercial fishermen to create the headroom to give more leeway for recreational anglers. I will make a similar argument this year, but the scientific evidence has not been benchmarked to take account of the measures that have already been introduced, so the right thing to do might be to review the bass situation properly in March and we will point that out.

As several hon. Members pointed out, we anticipate that bass will again be a controversial issue this year. Three years ago, as Fisheries Minister, I pushed for urgent measures to limit the catches of bass to maintain healthy stocks. We secured that and I have tried since to ensure that the Commission gets the balance right between the actions it takes on recreational anglers and those they take on commercial fishing. We argued last year that there should be a lower catch limit for the hook-and-line commercial fishermen to create the headroom to give more leeway for recreational anglers. I will make a similar argument this year, but the scientific evidence has not been benchmarked to take account of the measures that have already been introduced, so the right thing to do might be to review the bass situation properly in March and we will point that out.

A number of hon. Members have talked about future policy. Everyone will be aware that it is our intention and plan to introduce a fisheries Bill in this Session. Early next year, we will publish more detailed proposals for that Bill, which we anticipate will be introduced during the course of the year, probably before the summer. The Bill will set out very clearly our approach, which is that when we leave the European Union we will become an independent coastal state under international law. We will take control of our exclusive economic zone, which is out to 200 miles or the median line. From that point, we will work with our neighbours to agree issues such as access and quota shares. The hon. Member for Halifax asked what the basis of those quota allocations

Mr Bradshaw: Will the Minister give way?

George Eustice: I am going to carry on because I want to cover as many issues as possible.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) pointed out that the Celtic sea remains challenging. We are doing some mixed fishery analysis there, but the gadoid fishery, with whiting, cod and haddock, continues to create challenges and we are working with our scientists to address them.

There have been other changes this year. For the first time, we are seeing increases in cod of 10% and the scientific advice on nephrops is more positive, and we believe it may therefore be possible to get area VIIa nephrops to MSY sooner than anticipated. The science also supports significant uplifts for cod and haddock, albeit from a low base.

There is positive news on the east coast and the eastern channel for skates and rays, which is particularly important for some of our south-coast fishermen, with the science supporting an increase there and with no new evidence that we are likely to see a roll-over in the Celtic sea.
would be. We are looking at the issue of zonal attachment, which most people recognise is the fairest way to do such things.

My hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall asked whether we have historical catch data. We do. As she pointed out, the UK catches about 100,000 tonnes of fish a year in EU waters, and EU vessels catch some 750,000 tonnes in our waters, so there is an imbalance. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has visited the Faroe Islands to discuss its approach. Our view is that the six to 12-mile zone should be predominantly reserved for UK vessels, to keep that fishing pressure down. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) pointed out, however, there are issues such as Ireland and voisinage agreement, to which we are committed and which we support.

The right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) argued that we would lose influence by leaving the EU. I understand his argument, but I do not agree with it. The truth is that at the moment our influence in the EU is limited to the technocratic size of our qualified majority vote, and we are frequently unable to get the changes we support for the pro-science conservation measures we want. When we leave the EU, our influence will be defined by the scale of our fisheries resource and the need of all those other European countries to have access to it. In future there will be a bilateral UK-EU annual fisheries negotiation, and the UK will be in a stronger position.

I apologise to those Members whose points I have not been able to address. Many other points were raised, but I hope they appreciate that time is short and I want to give my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall an opportunity to reply.

4.59 pm

Mrs Murray: We have heard 18 speeches by Back Benchers from all around the coast. I thank colleagues very much. I am sure that the Minister has got the message. I have one more for him: please do not sacrifice access to resources because you think you might get access to the market.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the UK fishing industry.
sharks will, from next year, help to pay for incentives for credit union membership in the communities on which loan sharks prey.

A financially inclusive system is one that is fit for purpose for all in society, regardless of their economic status. It is one in which individuals can participate fully and not face punitive restrictions in the financial products that they can access. It is also a system in which measures are taken to help to prevent people from falling into a downward spiral of financial hardship.

Every constituency MP knows the scale of the issues. There are approximately 1.5 million unbanked adults in the UK. According to Citizens Advice research, 13.5 million adults have difficulty managing money and making financial decisions. The ONS found that in the first quarter of this year only 2% of income was put aside as savings. The savings of those who do have them are often woefully insufficient to deal with life’s inevitable financial pressures—because of the breakdown of a washing machine or a car needed for work—through to more fundamental losses of income. The requirement for credit is therefore a given.

Financial exclusion can be further exacerbated by factors such as the high cost of credit and pay-as-you-go services. The commission estimated this poverty premium to be a cost of £1,300 a year to our poorest families. In the meantime, many from across the income spectrum lack good financial guidance at a time when the range and complexity of financial products has never been greater, and the need to make the right long-term decisions, in the light of increasing longevity, has never been more acute.

Financial inclusion is a huge topic, but the House will be pleased to hear that I intend to focus this debate on education, information and guidance. I was the director of a credit union before entering this place, so I knew our sense of frustration—indeed, I am afraid, our sense of failure—at not being anywhere near as effective as we felt we should have been at persuading those in need of credit to use our cheaper community rates rather than accessing high-cost and high-risk lending.

The battle to ensure financial awareness has to start very early. I welcome the fact that the new national curriculum has made financial literacy statutory for the first time as part of citizenship education for 11 to 16-year-olds. I also recognise that improvements in basic maths, alongside the excellent results we have seen recently in literacy, are fundamental. However, I am afraid that focusing on secondary level may be too late. A report by the Money Advice Service found that financial habits are largely formed by the age of seven, and the need to make the right long-term decisions, in the light of increasing longevity, has never been more acute.

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This will be but one early example of the body’s strategic function to support and co-ordinate the development of a national strategy to improve financial capability. The SFGB will have to rise to the challenge outlined in research by Which?, which shows that only 36% of consumers use Government advisory bodies as an information source about their financial options.

Advertising and effective resourcing are key to ensuring high uptake, particularly among the groups who would benefit most from accessibility. Financial exclusion disproportionately affects lone parents, single pensioners and the long-term sick and disabled, and the active recruitment of those people requires the effective use of Government funding.

I would also like pensions guidance made much more widely available. Without wishing to be indelicate, Madam Deputy Speaker, I can say that the services of Pension Wise, determined by age as they were, are available to our excellent Minister, but not, alas, to his excellent Parliamentary Private Secretary and nor, surprisingly, to myself. The younger the age range, the more effective this service will be.

I finish where I began. The SFGB will have a role in advancing financial inclusion, as will the new financial inclusion policy forum, which will be co-chaired by the Minister and the Economic Secretary. Especially at a point when the interest rate cycle is turning, financial inclusion is of critical importance. I welcome the moves by the Government that are under way, but I welcome still more the further reforms that I look forward to the Minister progressing.

5.11 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): It is a great pleasure to speak on behalf of the Government on the key issue of financial inclusion and the single financial guidance body, which we hope to bring before the House in the new year.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Jeremy Quin) for calling the debate and for the contribution he made as a step-in member of the Financial Inclusion Commission, following in the footsteps of my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (Mr Hurd). It is fair to say at the outset that I am deeply grateful to the commission’s authors, and I have met many of them, including Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles, who has been of great assistance to me in the five months I have been doing this job. He is part of the reason why we have a financial inclusion Minister at this stage.

It is an exciting time to be doing this job, in circumstances where we have over 8.5 million people automatically enrolled in a workplace pension and where we have the Financial Guidance and Claims Bill coming forward—it completed its passage through the House of Lords on 23 November, and it will come to this House in the new year. We are driving forward the points raised by my hon. Friend, whether on the pensions dashboard or the mid-life MOT.

I am particularly passionate about the need to address people’s financial inclusion and capability. If I may briefly digress and talk about my personal circumstances. I co-founded a local community bank in my constituency, in the north-east. Our community bank was launched in November 2015 by the Archbishop of York, John Sentamu. It was specifically tasked with trying to compete payday lenders out of business, as asked for by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby. It has a small staff and an incredible team of local volunteers. It is fully accredited, with significant amounts of money deposited, and it makes low-cost loans to those who need them most.

I am no longer personally involved, because my ministerial role prevents me from doing so, but I do, as a Minister, want it to be my mission to champion such locally led positive solutions and to evangelise for savings and pensions. I pay tribute to all the staff who have helped so much in that institution.

The second institution I think it fair to thank is the Lords Committee that prepared a very detailed report in the 2016-17 Parliament on tackling financial exclusion. That was responded to by the Government recently. I pay tribute to the work the Committee has done addressing this issue. I also pay tribute to the Money Advice Service, the Pensions Advisory Service, Pension Wise and all their staff, because we would not be where we are today without their efforts. However, more particularly, those three organisations are particularly enthused by the opportunities that lie ahead with the single financial guidance body to address the issue we are all so keen to tackle: financial inclusion.

We are working very closely across the Government on this. It is sometimes argued—not, I accept, under this Government in any way whatsoever—that we exist in silos and that Departments do not necessarily speak to each other. I am particularly encouraged that the Economic Secretary to the Treasury and Ministers in other Departments are equally committed to addressing financial inclusion, and that we have a forum coming together to be co-chaired by the Treasury and the Department for Work and Pensions. That shows that we are jointly addressing this key issue.

We need to provide people with access to the tools and services that they need to plan their lives and to avoid the unnecessary costs that come with financial exclusion. It is also important, however, that people are confident that the financial system itself will work for them—that there is responsible capitalism, that they will be protected from practices that are a threat to their finances and that they can make financial decisions themselves that are appropriate throughout their lives. The single financial guidance body will be the key addressee of financial capability in the United Kingdom. We realise that not enough people know how to manage their money effectively. This body will ensure that those people, especially those who are struggling, are easily able to access free and impartial guidance to help them to make more effective decisions about their pensions and their money and to seek advice on their debt.

There has been widespread support for the measures contained in the Bill, which passed on a cross-party basis in the House of Lords after significant amendment and improvement. It is a credit to the Houses of Parliament that a Bill that started out as 19 clauses emerged from the House of Lords with 31 clauses, considerably amended but with great support from individual peers on all sides, as was borne out by Lord Stevenson noting that the Bill was strengthened.

“not because of any particular line or argument in a political or wider sense but because...as a result, the lives of people right around this country would be improved.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 21 November 2017; Vol. 787, c. 83.]
Jeremy Quin: I am grateful to the Minister for quoting Lord Stevenson, another member of the Financial Inclusion Commission, but I would like to bring my hon. Friend back to the importance of ensuring that this financial advice reaches those who need it most. I referred, for example, to the disabled, lone parents and single pensioners. It will be absolutely critical, as we measure the success of this body going forward, that it does reach the hardest-to-reach people who need its support the most.

Guy Opperman: It is interesting that my hon. Friend raises that point, because it was specifically addressed by their lordships in some detail. He will be aware that the new financial guidance body will simplify the existing public financial guidance landscape, making it easier for all people to access information and guidance.

Let me briefly address the statutory objectives and functions, because I think that that will reassure my hon. Friend on the point about those in society who are vulnerable. The single financial guidance body will have a number of statutory objectives: to improve the ability of people to make informed financial decisions; to support the provision of information, money and pensions guidance and debt advice in areas where it is specifically lacking; to ensure that information, guidance and debt advice is clear, cost-effective and not duplicated elsewhere; to ensure that information, guidance and debt advice is available to those most in need, particularly people in vulnerable circumstances; and to work with devolved authorities.

I stress that the chief executives of the three organisations—Michelle Cracknell, Jamey Johnson and Charles Counsell—all agree that bringing these organisations together and harnessing the product of the whole will enable specific opportunities to address this point. That is particularly appropriate given that one of the functions of the body is not only the protection of individuals as consumers but a strategic approach to ensure that this guidance is there. I hope that my hon. Friend is reassured that that is something that we massively support.

My hon. Friend raised financial education. The strategy behind the creation of the guidance body is to develop evidence that clearly shows which projects are successful and which are not. The Government want the body to prove what helps people to make better financial decisions throughout their lives, and then to deploy that understanding actively in its efforts in the area and share the knowledge as part of best practice.

The Government want the body to maximise the positive impact of financial education for children and young people, so that they are better prepared. We definitely see the guidance body taking forward the issue that my hon. Friend raises, to ensure that children are better prepared for financial challenges at any age. That strategic function is underpinned by the premise that, although Government bodies, industries, charitable functions and the voluntary sector are already doing excellent work, if they work together the impact will be that much greater.

I want to take the opportunity to celebrate the LifeSavers project, which I am pleased to say exists in my constituency. The organisation provides at primary level exactly the sort of thing that my hon. Friend described. The community bank of which I was a part is the provider of six LifeSavers programmes, which are supported by the Church of England and Virgin Money. There is literally a bank in the school, educating children about the importance of finance, loans, deposits and long-term saving, which is the way ahead.

A large number of schools are part of that project, and we are evaluating its impact. It is Treasury-supported to a limited degree. I have visited participating schools, such as Hexham First School in my constituency, and the difference that the programme makes is off the charts. My hon. Friend will be aware that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has provided a great deal more money for maths education, more maths teachers and support across the curriculum to ensure that that key point is addressed on an ongoing basis.

Briefly, I will mention other areas of the Bill that address some of the points that my hon. Friend raised. I believe that we all accept that problem debt is an issue for too many people. The Conservative party manifesto set out the commitment that the Government would adopt a breathing space scheme, to allow someone in serious problem debt to apply for legal protection from further interest charges and enforcement action for a period of up to six weeks. The Financial Guidance and Claims Bill will enable the Government to introduce such a scheme.

The breathing space scheme builds on the local work of organisations such as those that my hon. Friend mentioned in Horsham. It sounds as though they are approaching the matter in an interesting way. The Bill will build on the existing work of the Financial Conduct Authority, which has instituted rules. Also relevant is the fact that in October, the Treasury published a call for evidence on breathing space, and evidence is still being taken on the best and most appropriate way forward. My hon. Friend the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, officials and I have met the people behind the operation of the scheme in Scotland, which has already introduced a debt respite scheme and breathing space scheme.

The key to inclusion is access to engagement with savings and pensions. Surely, the game-changer on that over the past five years is the development of auto-enrolment, as part of a cross-party approach down many years. It is one of the unseen success stories of successive Governments, and it has engaged individual consumers and members of the public to an astonishing degree and reversed generations of decline in savings and pensions. The statistics bear some contemplation. We are about to approach the point at which 9 million people are auto-enrolled in a workplace pension. Hundreds of thousands of individual employers have signed up to the scheme, and it has not only totally stopped the rot in relation to pensions but reversed a long-term decline.

We are conducting an auto-enrolment review to assess where we are with the programme, and we will be considering a number of key areas. Those include the existing coverage, how to achieve the right balance between enabling as many people as possible to save and ensuring that it makes economic sense for them to be included, how we can improve engagement and how to strengthen the evidence base around contributions to support future decisions on contribution rates. I will report the findings to Parliament before the end of the year. We hope that the review will provide a clear sense of direction as part of the ongoing conversation.
I want briefly to talk about the pensions dashboard, which is an important part of the conversation about how we can better use technology. Just as the private sector has reformed the travel industry, insurance and so many other business, such that we now go online to access information, so we believe that the same will bring pensions into the digital age. The dashboard is an opportunity to give people access to their pensions data in a clear and simple form by bringing together savings information in one place online. It is an opportunity to give more people a sense of ownership and control over their pensions. This is a complex process, but I look forward to a massive meeting of stakeholders on Monday, to which hon. Members are most definitely invited. The good news is that the Department for Work and Pensions is taking this forward. We are utterly committed to the ongoing feasibility study and believe that by placing consumers at the heart of our approach, the Government, working closely of course with industry, regulators and other interested parties—notably, consumer organisations—can achieve the goal of such accessibility.

I want to make a brief final point about the mid-life MOT. It has struck me in this job that although we address individual issues, in relation to our health and our ongoing status quo as human beings—my GP regularly, and rightly, contacts me with ways to improve my health—we do not address our finances in a similar way. The concept of the mid-life MOT, as pioneered by John Cridland in his outstanding state pension review, published earlier this year, could enable us to better encourage and support people in preparing for later life and retirement in a holistic way. I encourage all private sector companies, through their human resources departments, to conduct mid-life MOTs—organisations such as Aviva are leading the way—and I certainly hope that the public sector will address those points as well. We believe that it is unquestionably a promising idea worth detailed scrutiny. Individual workers or employers could be provided with holistic advice and guidance to prepare for the gradual transition to retirement—whether at 45, 47 or 50—and it is something that the Government should be progressing.

It is often asked what brings us into politics. Social justice and financial inclusion are among the things that brought me into politics. When talk about the achievements of this Government and the coalition since my hon. Friend and my colleagues at my side—my hon. Friends the Members for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker) and for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones)—first entered the House of Commons, and when we talk about extending free childcare, improving schools results, introducing the national living wage, reducing income inequality and record high household incomes, we should remember that they are not just statistics, but steps towards tackling injustice and spreading opportunity. I believe passionately that the Bill will enable us to tackle financial inclusion. I welcome the work of those who have taken us this far on the journey, but I also welcome the opportunity to report to the House on the progress we have made and the opportunities that lie ahead to tackle this fundamental issue of social justice.

Question put and agreed to.

5.28 pm

House adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Monday 27 November 2017

[Sir David Crausby in the Chair]

University Tuition Fees

4.30 pm

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 182953 relating to university tuition fees.

It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Sir David.

Tuition fees were introduced in September 1998 under the then Labour Government as a means of funding tuition for undergraduate and postgraduate students at universities, with students required to pay up to £1,000 a year in fees. Over the years, those fees have rocketed, with some courses costing £9,250 for a typical three-year period. That is something the Chancellor is seeking to address and cap at a lower rate, while the Labour party has pledged to abolish tuition fees altogether.

Some observers argue that tuition fees have helped to improve the higher education sector and offer, by generating much-needed income for universities and allowing extra resourcing into education, improved facilities, research, student support services and high-quality staff. Others argue that tuition fees are simply plugging a £3.3 billion gap between the cost of research at universities and the revenue it generates. Whichever way we look at it, the issue of tuition fees and the provision of student loans is controversial. People being put in debt before they even start a career is rightly not popular with students, irrespective of the threshold of earnings required before repayment.

According to the Sutton Trust, eight out of 10 students will never fully repay their tuition fee loans, and the decision to raise the minimum earning level at which loan repayments kick in from £21,000 to £25,000 means that 81% of graduates will not pay back what they owe. Its report, “Fairer Fees”, identifies that typical debts on graduation are around £46,000, rising to £52,000 for those entitled to take out maintenance loans to cover the costs of living. The report also shines a light on the implications of Brexit. Currently, EU students studying in the UK are entitled to the same tuition fee loans as British students, and figures for last year show that 11%, or 8,600 people, remained in arrears. The position after Brexit remains unclear.

Universities, safe in the knowledge that virtually guaranteed income streams from tuition fees would rise every year, thus giving them financial stability, have been accused of paying eye-watering salaries to vice chancellors and the like, and are very much on the back foot as tuition fees have been put under intense scrutiny politically. The petition that we are debating puts the whole subject into sharp focus, and I believe that this debate is timely, given cross-party unease with things as they stand.

Back in the day, when I accessed higher education, we were provided with a grant, which had to be topped up through parental contributions. My folks did what they could but could not afford their full share, so like many other working-class kids from low-income backgrounds I struggled to get by—but I did, and at least I did not end up burdened with too much debt. Personally, I am uncomfortable with the fact that people—usually young people—have a financial noose placed around their neck on graduating, especially with the figures showing the high level of debt that remains unpaid.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on introducing this really important debate. I apologise for the fact that I cannot stay for all of it because I am meeting a group of schoolchildren from my constituency shortly. Does he agree that at a time of low productivity it makes absolutely no sense to have disincentives for people to progress to higher education, which would improve their skills educational attainment?

Mike Hill: I absolutely agree, and that is especially the case for people from low-income backgrounds. I would prefer to see the end of tuition fees and a return to a grant-based system or alternative method of funding.

4.35 pm

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I have to confess to being slightly surprised at being called first, but none the less I am very happy to contribute to the debate and thank you very much for the opportunity to do so. I also thank the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) for introducing the debate.

I wanted to contribute this afternoon because the subject is close to my heart and of particular interest to me. When I read the petition I was somewhat intrigued by some of the statements made in it, and I think it is important that such debates baged on the actual reality. As we know, the petition states:

“University fees are rising more and more.”

Well, a month or so ago there was a statement saying that university fees would be frozen, although I accept that the petition was probably submitted before that was announced. It goes on to say:

“£9000 for university fees is too high and the stress of being in debt is what puts individuals off applying for degrees.”

I completely understand that notion, but the reality does not bear it out; the statistics, the data and what happens day in and day out in our universities do not suggest that that is actually occurring.

I looked at the UCAS information submitted after the last round of UCAS applications were made. The number of 18-year-olds who went to university last year, when this scheme was in place, was at record levels, at nearly a quarter of a million students, up 1.5% from previous years; the total number of students currently in university is over half a million, which, again, is at a record level and over 0.5% up; and someone from the kind of income groups and social economic groups that the hon. Gentleman described, and which I think he and I both originate from, is 70% more likely to go to university now than they were in 2006. I accept that there is a challenge and that many people are concerned, but the reality is that many more students are going to university compared with a number of years ago, and many more students from low-income backgrounds are going to university compared with a number of years ago. My first fundamental point is that we have to be careful to have these debates on the facts.
Secondly, we have to look again at what the principle is. What are we ultimately trying to do around university fees? The key point I always come back to when debating the principle of tuition fees is that somebody has to pay, so the question is who? The answer is either general taxation—that is, the taxpayer pays—or that some contribution is made by the people who will ultimately benefit from this the most. When I went to university in 1999, it was the second year of tuition fees. I paid £1,000, although I recognise that is nothing like the amount of money asked for today. I accept the notion that if someone will benefit—if they are likely to achieve a greater amount of pay over their working life—they should be expected to pay a greater share of the amount it costs to get them into that position.

Margaret Greenwood: On that point, does the hon. Gentleman agree that there is a societal good in having a highly educated population? The cost of that education should not be placed entirely on the individual, but we as a society should value it and pay for it?

Lee Rowley: I completely accept that there is a societal good, and that is exactly why we should have debates such as this one. The reality is still that a proportion of the cost per student, on average, in our university sector is being paid for by society. An increasing portion is being paid for by the individual, but a portion is still being paid by society. The hon. Lady is absolutely right to make that statement. The system already makes provision for that, and the question is where we draw the line.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): From the hon. Gentleman’s remarks and his answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood), does he accept that there needs to be a balance and that £9,000 tuition fees for the majority are wrong? That should be scaled depending on what institution someone goes to and what course they attend, for example, and there should be factors determining how much people pay in tuition fees or not.

Lee Rowley: I accept in principle that there should be a societal contribution and an individual contribution, which I think the hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) was querying. My argument—the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) was absolutely correct about this—is that when an individual gains the most, they should be expected to contribute the most. We can have a party political debate about where to draw those lines, and I would probably take a different view from the Labour Members in the Chamber and from the Leader of the Opposition. In principle, somebody pays, and the question is whether that comes from general taxation or, at least, a contribution from the individual. My view is that it should be a contribution from the individual, and I understand, accept and support the direction of travel on tuition fees in recent years.

The motion that we are debating is about reducing fees to £3,000. In preparing for the debate, I looked at some economic bases on which the current system works. In my understanding, if we reduced fees to that amount, it would blow a significant multi-billion-pound hole in the national finances. I would not support that, but if it happened, the proponents of the measure would need to explain where the additional money would come from. It would be likely to reopen the debate about whether we should cap student numbers, which raises a question about supporting aspiration. It would probably also reopen the debate about the amount of money spent on supporting students through waivers, outreach programmes, measures to increase retention, combination discounts and hardship funds, with which nearly £0.4 billion is associated for the coming year. I would be interested to hear from those proponents where the alternatives would come from or what would be stopped if the proposed tuition fee reduction went through.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I am listening carefully to the hon. Gentleman. Does he not accept that there can be workforce issues with particular professions, such as nursing and midwifery, which we have at the University of West London in my constituency? Professor Peter John, the vice-chancellor, has contacted me, saying that he is worried about the 20% decrease in applications since the nurse bursary was cut. It feels as if student fees are adding insult to injury. The hon. Gentleman has pointed out that £3,000 is a bit of an anachronism because no one has suggested going back to that, but that profession has particularly suffered, with applications down 60% on the normal cycle for the February intake. Given that there has been a steep fall in EU nurses, frozen pay and NHS cuts, it feels like that profession is being battered by this measure as well as everything else.

Lee Rowley: I thank the hon. Lady for that point, but I am not au fait with the specific subject and area that she outlined. However, if we accept the principle, which started in the late ’90s and was extended in subsequent periods, of trying to engender choice in this area and accept some element of market-based principles—I know that is controversial with some in the Chamber—then when there are demand, challenge or supply problems, the market mechanisms should have the opportunity to work.

I do not want to be totally critical of today’s debate, because I recognise that there is a genuine issue and that the petitioner began the petition because of genuine concern about where we had ended up as a country. I accept that the system as a whole has some issues, which is why I welcome the Government’s full review of tuition fees and the education system in general. I recognise that there has been inflation in the system in recent years and discussions about vice-chancellor pay in the past few months. I accept that initially, when the larger fee came in, not all institutions were expected to go to the top amount, so the review is timely and important. The argument is not about whether the system works perfectly now, because it does not—no system ever works perfectly, but this one obviously has challenges—and it is not about whether areas can be improved. Specific, obvious issues with the system have been highlighted in recent months, and I accept all that.

Ultimately, we come back to the principle that somebody pays: the taxpayer or the individual, or the individual makes a contribution. I think it is entirely legitimate that the individual makes a contribution. I support the system as it stands, pending the fuller review of the detail. For me, this is ultimately a question of a quasi-hypothesization or no hypothesization. Somehow the money...
will be spent and it will be paid back. The question is: who pays it back? Is the money associated with the people who get the greatest benefit? In my view, the people who benefit the greatest should contribute the most.

Jim Fitzpatrick rose—

Sir David Crausby (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that the same rules apply in Westminster Hall as in the Chamber. If Back Benchers wish to speak, they will need to stand up to indicate that. As only Jim Fitzpatrick stood up, I will call him first.

4.45 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair today, Sir David. Thank you for calling me earlier than I had anticipated. You have explained why and, fortunately, colleagues will not have to wait too long for their turn, as I will not detain them for long.

I am grateful to the Petitions Committee and my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) for the opportunity to participate briefly in the debate. I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), who made a thoughtful contribution, outlining the pressures on the further and higher education system and the pros and cons of different elements. It was a fair presentation and I look forward to hearing the Minister respond to his comments, and to everybody else’s, including those of the Scottish National party spokesperson, the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), and of my hon. Friend for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden). I suspect that my hon. Friend and I were the only two people in the Chamber today who were in the Commons when tuition fees were introduced in 1998, so I look forward to his wisdom prevailing in the debate from the Labour Front Bench.

I confess that I only realised the debate was taking place when the communications hub alerted me that my constituents had contributed the 10th-highest number of signatures to the petition—12,089. I tried to work out why that might be the case, but I have not arrived at a conclusion. I have not seen email traffic from my constituents to support the level of concern that the numbers suggest, but the petition has obviously attracted them and I am pleased to make a contribution.

I am grateful to the House of Commons Library for its background paper. Reading it brought back memories of our debates in 1998 on introducing tuition fees at £1,000 level, and, then, in 2004, on raising them to £3,000. Our discussions were along the lines that the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire indicated—about the cap on student numbers and releasing it to allow more young people to go into further and higher education, which would require some assistance and contribution through tuition fees. That argument clearly won the day.

In 1998, I was ambivalent about the £1,000 level, mainly because the conditions attached meant that most young people and families in my constituency would not be expected to pay since the majority of my young constituents came from below the household income threshold at which it would be required. Tuition fees would not have added to the pressures that they experienced simply because of the size of household incomes in Poplar and Canning Town, as it was in those days. I assume that I supported the proposal—I have no recollection of ‘not doing so’.

However, the sister policy of abolishing maintenance grants, which the hon. Gentleman also mentioned and which the Library briefing paper focused on, concerned me. Whereas fees and their introduction would have had minimal effect, the proposed abolition of maintenance grants would have had—and did have—a profound impact. I voted against it, and that was my first—and probably only—vote against a three-line Whip in our 11 years in government. I knew that many families locally would not have been able to support their children into further or higher education without the grants. The briefing paper makes just that point by quoting the National Union of Students president, who said in her evidence to the House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee that simply abolishing fees would not help students, and that “just scrapping tuition fees will not solve the problem. It is about maintenance support. Scotland is a prime example. It has no tuition fees, and students are still struggling. It is important to maintain maintenance grants.”

Sir David, I am sorry I did not include you in our little gang of survivors from 1998, because you are non-political when in the Chair, but you were there, and you will remember, as will my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South, that, interestingly, the Labour Government restored maintenance grants four years later, recognising that they were an important policy. That was welcome.

Dr Huq: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech on his rebel past and what fees were like before they turned into the monster that they have become. In those days, did he foresee cases like that of Siobhan Hallett of Acton? She makes £27,000 and her repayments are £58 a month, but if she works any overtime, her repayments rise to £115. She says: “I feel like I am being robbed every time I try to better myself in society.”

She wants to get on the housing ladder, but she is being penalised by rising loan repayments. The Student Loans Company is taking what she earns.

Jim Fitzpatrick: My hon. Friend makes an important point about repayments—when they start, how much is repaid and at what interest rate. To be fair, the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire raised those points as well. I am sure that the Government are trying to weigh up all the different elements, because they all affect each other and the system is clearly unfair. I am sure that when my hon. Friend gets a chance to make her own contribution, she will focus on that; I might intervene to support her points, because they are emphatic and critical to young people’s quality of life during their time at university.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman referred to the situation in Scotland. Is he aware not only that students in Scotland are not saddled with £27,000 in debt in the way that students in other parts of the UK are, but that last year, additionally, almost 3,000 students qualified for a non-repayable bursary or had their funding increased? Will he comment on that particular situation?
Jim Fitzpatrick: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for mentioning Scotland. I will come back to that. The position is also referred to on page 13 of the House of Commons Library briefing: I note that the Scottish Government are currently conducting a review of Scottish funding. That is welcome, because there are questions about how the policies on tuition fees, loans and repayments are applied in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. I am pleased to hear that the Scottish Government are carrying out a review. I will return in a moment to what the Library briefing says about that.

As I was saying, I supported the introduction of tuition fees to help raise the cap on the numbers of young people going into further and higher education at college and university, because it was clearly recognised that the ceiling had been there for too long—30% was not right for our 21st-century country—and a change had to be made.

The Library briefing makes the point that each £1,000 cut in tuition fees would cause universities to lose £1 billion in income, or else the taxpayer would have to make up the difference, as the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire said. I do not support the abolition of tuition fees, but neither do I support £9,000 across the board. They should be variable, with the highest fees for the Russell group alone; £3,000 certainly seems too low for those universities. The petition, which is welcome, indicates that this debate is very much still alive.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): There is general agreement that for good-quality university education to be sustainable, it must be paid for. There are many aspects to that, including the public purse and the individual. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that maybe we should consider looking to employers, who are also beneficiaries of graduates and postgraduates in their businesses? Could they be greater players in funding the education system that we need and desire?

Jim Fitzpatrick: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. My hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) said in her intervention that all of society benefits when a highly skilled cadre of young people come through the system. They make us more productive, more energetic and more able to compete in the world market. These are difficult questions for the Minister. I am sure that he has all the answers for us, and we look forward to hearing them in due course. Yes, a contribution across the board is entirely appropriate.

The Library briefing has some interesting paragraphs on fees, as I mentioned in response to the intervention by the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock). Page 13 says:

“The free fees policy in Scotland has been discussed by many commentators, most noticeably by academic Lucy Blackman Hunter, who has suggested that free fees benefit middle-class students the most. It has also been suggested that the free fees policy is unsustainable and has led to the underfunding of Scottish universities and rising debt among poorer students.”

As I mentioned, the Scottish Government have indicated that they will be holding a review. I certainly wish them every success in that. My son went to Glasgow University, although as a London-born resident he paid full tuition fees.

Deidre Brock: I appreciate the point, but that does not address the fact that many students now in university in Scotland will leave with significantly smaller debt than students in England who are currently paying £27,000, as has been mentioned, and those paying slightly less elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

Jim Fitzpatrick: The hon. Lady makes a good point. The point has also been made that many students are leaving university with debts so high that they will never pay them back. The loss to the Exchequer is transparent. It suggests that the balance is wrong and needs adjusting. I do not detract from what she said, but the Library briefing says that the Scottish Government are reviewing the situation. Maybe they will make some adjustments to indicate how they would make the balance more equitable.

In conclusion, I am grateful to the petitioners for the opportunity to make these brief comments. Debts, interest rates, unpaid loans and fee levels have been key manifesto issues in every election at least since 2001. From this debate, it is clear that that will continue.

4.57 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir David. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) and the Petitions Committee for bringing this debate, after the online petition was signed by 160,000 people, so that we can discuss the subject.

This is the issue that first drew me into elected politics as a student at the University of Leeds. I was concerned that the Dearing review would bring forward fees, ending the free education that I enjoyed along with many other Members of this House, and it led me to seek election to the student union executive at Leeds University. I spent that year and every year since then campaigning against tuition fees and for a return to free higher education. This debate is close to my heart. I hope that the Government will take heed and reflect on the damaged caused by increased fees.

This Government and the coalition that preceded them, who introduced £9,000 fees, view higher education as nothing more than a pre-work training course and a source of personal economic mobility. That marketised view of education does nothing to differentiate educational institutions from private profit-making entities and markets such as retail. To a free market ideologue, the system created by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition is entirely logical; for the rest of us, however, it is deeply flawed. My view, and that of the thousands of people who signed the petition, is that tuition fees are not sustainable. I am sure that my hon. Friends will agree that education is not a business but contributes to the common good of the nation—what we used to call the common weal.

To look overseas, Chile under Pinochet reduced and then stopped providing direct grants to universities. Bahram Bekhradnia of the World Bank team that went to Chile to help to reform the system said:

“Universities were funded for teaching only via the tuition fees that students henceforth paid. And students received loans from the government to enable them to pay their fees. Sound familiar?”

This Government’s system is straight out of the Pinochet free market playbook, one widely recognised to have failed. Those are not my words but those of somebody from the World Bank. He continues:

“Well, after three decades, the Chilean government has now concluded that this is an unsatisfactory way to fund higher
education...Chileans are looking for a new system under which the government will provide grants to universities funded from general taxation.”

They have started down that path and away from a fees-based system.

Looking at a country that undertook the free market experiment in higher education over 30 years ago, and which we are still in the early stages of, is instructive about what will happen here in future. First, in Chile, the debt of former students is colossal in relation to their earnings—by far the highest in the world. England has started to catch up: graduate debt is exploding as cohorts of students from the new funding regime complete their degrees. Secondly, just as in primary and secondary education in this country, previous Chilean Governments encouraged private institutions of variable quality in tertiary education, which now educate 80% of people. As a result, there are serious concerns about some private institutions creaming off taxpayer-funded loans for students and making unsatisfactory provision in return. Thirdly, the funding arrangements make it difficult, if not impossible, for the Government to steer the higher education system in a way that is possible with direct grant funding. That matters when higher education is a vital element of a country’s economic and social development, as Governments around the world, including the UK Government, increasingly believe.

That is a vision of our future unless we change the system. The Chilean Government under Michelle Bachelet have started to reform the system: 80,000 university students received free education last year and the majority of students had a cost reduction. It took Chile 30 years to reverse the mistakes of a free market in higher education. Let us not repeat the same mistakes here.

It is shameful, given that the contribution of the public purse to universities is one of the lowest in the OECD, that we are not seeing greater levels of state funding for something that contributes so much to our nation’s welfare. The Government contribute no more now with £9,250 fees than when £3,000 fees were introduced. In fact, with the proposed freeze at £9,250 this year and next year, universities are seeing a real-terms funding cut. Students are paying for the majority of the system but seeing cuts to university funding from central Government. Students and universities are victims of the Government’s chaotic policy. Free market ideology means the Government take no responsibility for the destruction and dismantling of our once renowned centres of education but degrade our institutions by starving them of state funding. It is time to call a halt to the coalition Government’s free market experiment and this Government’s continuation of it, and to implement a system that encourages readily available higher education for anyone with a will and a desire to learn.

5.2 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I appreciate the opportunity to speak this afternoon, Sir David. I was due to be a member of a statutory instrument Committee but was kindly relieved of that duty by a colleague. I thank all those who signed the petition that allows us to have this debate. I support the comments made by my hon. Friends the Members for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) and for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) and by other Opposition speakers.

I will address fee repayments in my constituency. Reading is a university town, as many hon. Members may know, with a particularly high number of graduates. The local workforce has a high proportion of highly skilled and highly trained people in industries such as IT, research in the public and private sectors, and a range of applied technology businesses—many of which are exactly the sort of business that the Government seek to see grow as we are due to leave the European Union. Many of those young graduates are above the loan repayment threshold but do not yet command such a high salary as to be insulated from the effect of fee repayments. I notice hon. Members nodding: the situation is similar in many other high-growth parts of the country.

I will give additional details to illustrate how the mistaken tuition fees policy has a harmful impact on that group of people and on economic growth in areas that are hubs and should be fostered, as the Government have pointed out. A practical example is a teacher in their 20s living in Reading who has effectively had a 15% pay cut—this applies to public and private sector staff, as many private sector employees have had a real-terms pay cut too—but faces an additional charge on their income of up to 9% a year through tuition fee repayments because they are in the cohort that has been through the £9,000 a year regime. We can imagine the impact on key workers such as teachers, nurses, social workers, university staff, IT workers and others. That must also be viewed in the context of high house prices and the high cost of living such as the high travel-to-work costs of a season ticket to London or for local commuting—many people in the Thames Valley commute between towns with growing high-tech industries such as Maidenhead, Reading and Newbury, where Vodafone is based. House prices can be as high as £300,000 for a two-bedroom terraced house in Reading. Not all houses are that price, but that context is significant.

At the same time, a young person in their 20s or 30s who has to repay large amounts of debt, who faces relatively static pay or indeed a pay cut, and who faces high house prices, may want to start a family but may delay that because of the impact of the extra costs and burdens on them. Many employers in high-growth areas such as Reading are suffering staff shortages. The high real cost of repayments in a high cost of living area is part of the cocktail of factors affecting those shortages. We have a shortage of teachers locally, as was pointed out to me by the local head teachers I met last week. Young staff, potentially some of the most important in the educational sector, who have gone through their initial teacher training, who are bedding in and who have a lot of their career ahead of them, are moving out of our area to live in lower cost parts of the country where the effects of loan repayment will be less. The same is true for areas such as social work, nursing and midwifery, where real concerns have been raised; the four-hour A&E wait target has not been met at our local hospital for many months.

Private sector employers are also heading in the same direction. We have some very large employers in our local IT sector, as well as a burgeoning group of entrepreneurial small businesses and a large supply chain. Many people in those supply chain businesses and many of the entrepreneurs cannot command the same salaries as the highest of high flyers in blue chip
industries. I hope the Government will consider that, particularly on the day they have launched their industrial strategy, and reflect on the need to allow these clusters to develop in towns and cities such as Reading—the small and rapidly growing urban centres with universities that are the engines our economy needs as we face the challenge of Brexit.

The challenge of repaying such debts is increasing year on year, given the context I have described. Not only have tuition fees risen, but other costs have too. In particular, the cost of housing is significant and growing because the supply is not expanding. Conservative Members will point to the Government’s Budget measures last week, but I remain sceptical because other Government measures have not raised the supply of housing. Sadly, under George Osborne, plans for 1,000 new council houses in my constituency were stopped by the Government’s mistaken approach, and the Government have fought the local council’s attempts to keep a larger proportion of housing at affordable levels in private developments.

Given the rising house prices, the lack of real housing supply in the area, and the further austerity that will lead to further falls in real earnings for people in the private sector as the local labour market is depressed as a result, it is high time for the Government to reconsider their tuition fees policy. I urge Government Members to do so—particularly the Minister, who I know is a deeply thoughtful and perceptive person. I am sure that they have the best of intentions. If they take a step back, as my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West suggested, and look at the international comparators and the trajectory we are on, I believe they will reconsider their worrying and mistaken policy.

May I conclude with a small plug for the University of Reading and other local institutions? Our town is lucky to have them driving local growth in IT, science and other fields. I hope that such growth continues to flourish, but I fear the tuition fees policy may be an obstacle to it.

5.10 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): It is good to be speaking in a tuition fees debate once again, and I thank the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) for kicking off this afternoon.

The Government enjoy using the phrase “make work pay”, but today I will start by saying that we need to make education pay. For many young people who face the choice between crippling student debt or taking a low-paid, unskilled job, only one route is possible. The hon. Gentleman spoke about his working-class background and how university was a struggle for his family. I understand that completely; I, too, come from a working-class background. I was one of five children, and all five of us went to university. That was only possible because we not only did not pay fees, but had generous maintenance grants to support us and our family while we were at university.

This debate is fundamentally about the value we place on education and about our ambitions for the future of our young people and our nation. Will the young people embarking on tertiary education courses contribute economically and societally to our nations, or are we providing them with a service for which they must pay? The hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) talked about the free-marketisation of education, and spoke in detail about the experience in Chile. He explained that it took Chile 30 years to understand and appreciate the errors of its ways and change its tuition structure entirely. I really hope it does not take the Minister 30 years to do the same for English students.

The hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) asked who pays, and his conclusion was that it should be those who benefit. I do not disagree, but I question exactly who benefits. As legislators, we must be clear about that. In a higher education debate on 13 September, the Secretary of State for Education referred to fees as a “burden” on society—a dangerous piece of spin that the Government can ill afford to peddle. The post-Brexit economic success of the UK will rely on a well-educated population with a range of educational experiences and expertise. We already have skills shortages in science, technology, engineering, maths, healthcare, education and digital, so graduates are needed now more than ever to ensure that the UK remains competitive outside the EU. When we consider that EngineeringUK estimates an annual shortfall of 20,000 graduates in engineering alone, we can see that fees for tertiary education are illogical.

The effects of the tuition fees policy are also clearly demonstrated by the abolition of nursing bursaries. The hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq), who is no longer in her place, pointed out that the decline in the numbers of those choosing to study nursing comes at the same time as a sharp drop in the number of EU nurses registering to work in the UK. That needs to be a wake-up call to the Government about their damaging policies.

A fundamental principle of the Scottish National party is that education should be based on the ability to learn, never the ability to pay. We have a strong and principled record of opposing increases in tuition fees in England and Wales, and we will continue to reject any legislation that seeks to increase the financial burden on students. Of course, fees are not the only attack on English students: the interest on tuition fees has risen sharply, maintenance grants have been scrapped, and now we hear that some students’ debt on completion of their course has reached an astronomical £50,000, which will leave many young graduates saddled with debt throughout their entire working life. The hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) spoke about the repayment threshold, and the salaries and costs of living of those who may be just above it. Coupled with increased costs of living, repayment is a huge burden on people’s week-to-week finances.

In Scotland, we take a holistic view of education. I have already referred to “tertiary education”, and I try to refer to it generally, because the distinction between further education colleges and higher education institutions in Scotland is fluid. I have heard many times in this place a spin on UCAS figures suggesting that fewer young people from disadvantaged backgrounds enter higher education in Scotland than in other parts of the UK. That is used as an example of why it would be wrong to abolish fees, but I am sure that the Minister and other hon. Members present know that that is simply not the reality.
One third of degree-level courses in Scotland are in further education, but that is not accounted for in UCAS figures. Audit Scotland reports that it amounts to more than 45,000 Scottish students undertaking higher education in Scotland's colleges. In Scotland, many students access higher education from further education, but that is not captured by UCAS figures either. For the benefit of hon. Members who have not heard me cite what UCAS has to say on the matter, let me quote it again:

“For people living in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, UCAS covers the overwhelming majority of full-time undergraduate provision... In Scotland there is a substantial section of provision that is not included in UCAS’ figures. This is mostly higher education provided in further education colleges, which represents around one third of young, full-time undergraduate study in Scotland... Accordingly, the statistics on UCAS entry rates and acceptances... reflect only... undergraduate study that uses UCAS.”

Put simply, UCAS figures consider only direct entry from school to university; they take no account of degrees delivered in FE or of young people who enter university from an access or college course.

Bill Grant: I cite these figures off the cuff, but I believe that in Scotland we have lost 150,000 further education places, which has reduced accessibility to further education for many. Despite the very good efforts of the Scottish Government, we are still not attracting enough people from lower-income backgrounds to university. Those appear to be the facts; the hon. Lady may wish to agree or disagree with them.

Carol Monaghan: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman has read some figures but not fully understood them. We have college places aplenty in Scotland; we have college places that cannot be filled. There are now 116,000 full-time college places in Scotland, which is more than ever before.

In a *Times Higher Education* article last year, Professor Danny Dorling of Oxford University wrote:

“In contrast to England, Scotland shows what a real narrowing of inequalities would look like. There, the most dramatic change has been in the proportion of children from the most disadvantaged quintile of areas going to the highest tariff universities. Home student applications continue to rise in Scotland even as they begin to stall in England.”

To talk down the interactions between FE and HE in getting young people from disadvantaged backgrounds into tertiary education does a great disservice to the institutions and the young people served by them.

Our free tuition policy benefits 120,000 undergraduate students every year, saving them from the massive debt seen in other parts of the UK. The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) stated that he was probably one of only two Members who were here when tuition fees were first introduced in 1998. In 1998, my son was born. He is now in his second year of university in Scotland and he has no tuition fees. At the moment, he is still debt-free, because like many students in Scotland, particularly in the west of Scotland, he lives at home and he has a job to supplement his life, especially his social life, if that is required. However, he is debt-free and hopefully will remain so.

Even taking into consideration my previous comments about UCAS statistics, the number of students from Scotland's most deprived areas who are entering university has increased by 19% in just two years. We are clearly ahead of others in supporting such young people to ensure that they remain in education. Alastair Sim from Universities Scotland says that the entry rate for 18-year-olds from the most deprived areas of Scotland is 51% higher than 10 years ago.

Despite the attempts of this Tory Government to use statistics to spin the story, the facts in Scotland are different. In Scotland, we place a value on our young people; from baby boxes to free tuition, we tell them that they are important and we need them. We are told that our free tuition prevents Scottish students from accessing the available places. Again, that would help the Tory spin, but once again I have to disappoint. Since the SNP came to office in 2007, the number of Scottish-domiciled full-time degree entrants has risen by 12%, and since 2013 the total number of funded places available at Scottish universities, including additional places to widen access to students from Scotland's most deprived areas, has also increased.

There is no doubt that the Scottish Government's investment in additional places for access students and for those progressing from college has had a positive impact. We are investing £51 million a year to support 7,000 places, including those for access and articulation from FE to HE.

We are reaping the benefits. UCAS statistics for this academic year show that more than 34,500 applicants living in Scotland accepted a place at university this year, which is an increase of 2% and a record number at this stage in the cycle. Contrary to what the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire said, all other UK nations saw a fall in the number of people accepted to university compared with last year.

Jim Fitzpatrick: In my speech, and in response to the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), I referred to a comment in the House of Commons Library briefing paper that the Scottish Government are carrying out a review of this whole area of policy. Is that the case, or is it not? The hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) is painting a very positive picture, but if the picture is so positive why would the Scottish Government have to carry out a review?

Carol Monaghan: Of course the review is taking place. Despite the positive picture, and it is a positive picture, we do not stop there. We will keep going and keep going, until we can ensure that every young person, regardless of background, can go to university or can see university as something they would like to do.

The Scottish Government are doing other things, too. In Glasgow, they run a project called the advanced higher hub. I have mentioned it before in this place. In Scotland, advanced highers are the highest school qualification. The advanced higher hub is funded by the Scottish Government and supported by Glasgow City Council and Glasgow Caledonian University. It takes young people from disadvantaged schools all over Glasgow and brings them together to do their advanced highers. The idea was that if only one or two pupils were doing advanced highers in a particular school, it was not economically viable to run those courses, whereas bringing pupils from different schools together made it economically viable.
One of the side effects of the project arises from those students having their lessons on a university campus, as they start seeing university as something they can all do. University seems normal; the process is normalised. The number of young people who have attended the hub and who are now going to university is just overwhelming. It is a huge success story. We will continue to do all we can to widen access and ensure that our young people are given the best opportunity to succeed.

I want to say something about Labour’s position. I welcome Labour’s stance on tuition fees and I support any attempts to reduce or abolish those charges, but I struggle to understand Labour’s position. I want to have faith in it and I want to believe the Labour party, but we also see the Labour Government in Wales increasing tuition fees. I appeal to Labour colleagues in this place to follow the SNP, talk to their Labour colleagues in Wales and consider what can be done so that the public can be assured of their intent.

Bill Grant: There must be two Scotlands—I am sure there are—because the Scotland that I see in my mind’s eye has an education system that was at one time the envy of the world but that is now struggling, which I very much regret. I understand that in the programme for international student assessment scales, or PISA scales, which are a measure of education, Scotland has slipped back to 27th, behind Lithuania. I know that PISA is not linked to university or higher education. However, Scotland is good, but we need to make some improvement in our education system.

Carol Monaghan: I am happy to talk about PISA and Scottish education. It is amazing that throughout the world Scottish education is lauded as a shining example; it is only here that it is not. We come here and we hear about how awful Scottish education is, but Scottish education is ranked extremely highly.

As for the PISA tests, they look at pure knowledge—rote learning. They ask pupils to recall facts. That is not what the Scottish education system is about. There is an element of that, but it is also about problem-solving, employability, communication skills—in fact, it is about everything that employers are looking for that are not captured in any PISA tick-box tests.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I am interested in the arguments that the hon. Lady would use when meeting her constituents or others in Scotland about why those in vocational education should subsidise the children of their neighbours who are in higher education. One of the issues for many of us in England is that the country with education systems that do best in the test tend to be those with high levels of investment in education and of teacher qualification and a generally pro-education culture. Of these, the western countries are Finland and Canada, both of which have a lot to offer in pointing us in the right direction.

The hon. Lady comments on Scotland and on the nature of PISA. My understanding, from having worked with academics who are specialists in the comparison of different education systems and, indeed, in broader educational research, is that there are criticisms of PISA—it is one of a number of measures—but it measures not rote learning but rather students’ ability as teenagers to understand complex material and to act on their own. The Minister may want to comment on that as well. Trying to dismiss PISA as the hon. Lady is a duty of Government, of business and of society, which includes the taxpayer; to ensure that we have a well-educated population that can provide economic growth in different businesses and different sectors. Post-Brexit there will be a struggle to create economic growth. It is a duty of us all to pay our taxes so that those taxes can fund the higher education of our young people.

Carol Monaghan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I just wanted to make a point of clarification about PISA, which is a very interesting international study. As someone who was a civil servant in the Department for Education some years ago and who has worked in the sector recently, I think it is important to look at the broad picture that PISA gives but also to understand its strengths and weaknesses. One significant thing about PISA is that the country with education systems that do best in the test tend to be those with high levels of investment in education and of teacher qualification and a generally pro-education culture. Of these, the western countries are Finland and Canada, both of which have a lot to offer in pointing us in the right direction.

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Carol Monaghan: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way. I have been to Glasgow, although not for a few years, and I would be interested to see how the City of Glasgow College is doing things. However, at the end of the day, if we are going to reduce university fees in the way that she suggests, someone will have to pay for that. The truth about our system at the moment is that we have 20 of the best 100 universities in the world, not least because of the investment that has gone into them. We have overseas students who are effectively subsidising our students and if we lower the fees, someone will have to mind the gap that will be created. Who will that be?

Carol Monaghan: It is quite simple; once again, look north. One of my party’s fundamental principles is that education is about the ability to learn and not about the ability to pay, as I have already said. Paying for education is a duty of Government, of business and of society, which includes the taxpayer; to ensure that we have a well-educated population that can provide economic growth in different businesses and different sectors. Post-Brexit there will be a struggle to create economic growth. It is a duty of us all to pay our taxes so that those taxes can fund the higher education of our young people.

Matt Rodda: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. I just wanted to make a point of clarification about PISA, which is a very interesting international study. As someone who was a civil servant in the Department for Education some years ago and who has worked in the sector recently, I think it is important to look at the broad picture that PISA gives but also to understand its strengths and weaknesses. One significant thing about PISA is that the country with education systems that do best in the test tend to be those with high levels of investment in education and of teacher qualification and a generally pro-education culture. Of these, the western countries are Finland and Canada, both of which have a lot to offer in pointing us in the right direction.

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Carol Monaghan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I am not here to discuss PISA. I am happy to talk about it, but the fact is that the education system in Scotland has changed dramatically over the past 10 years to match the needs of businesses and employers and to allow our young people who want to go on to higher or further education to do so. Many things are done in Scotland that are simply not captured by PISA.

I finish by saying that the Institute for Fiscal Studies has calculated that if student debt were to be scrapped immediately in England £20 billion would be added to the UK Government debt and that delaying the decision until the end of the current Parliament would add £60 billion—three times that amount. That is perhaps something for the Government to think about because if that decision has to be taken, it should be taken sooner rather than later. The SNP is fully committed to guaranteeing fair access to higher education so that every young person, regardless of background, has an equal chance of going to university, and my party will continue to work hard to ensure that.

5.32 pm

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) for introducing the debate, with crispness but with insight. The truth of the matter is that a lot of water has run under the bridge since the e-petition was initiated. Members will have seen in the Library briefing that it was put together before the general election was called. Debate on it was therefore postponed. As I say, a lot of water has run under the bridge—under our bridge, and the Minister’s also perhaps—since then, but the reality that prompted 166,000 people to add their names to the petition remains the same. The current system of fees at record highs, and potentially rising in the years ahead, is unsustainable.

This has been a good-natured, thoughtful debate, with some excellent contributions from both sides of the House. This is the first time I have heard the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), and I pay tribute to his speech. There are always different ways of looking at how things have gone. He cited the figures on participation in education that are handed out by Tory Whips at every Education Committee, but with insight. The truth of the matter is that a lot of water has run under the bridge since the e-petition was initiated. Members will have seen in the Library briefing that it was put together before the general election was called. Debate on it was therefore postponed. As I say, a lot of water has run under the bridge—under our bridge, and the Minister’s also perhaps—since then, but the reality that prompted 166,000 people to add their names to the petition remains the same. The current system of fees at record highs, and potentially rising in the years ahead, is unsustainable.

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twice as high as in the US. In June this year, the Institute for Fiscal Studies sounded further alarms about the Government’s direction of travel. It said: “Replacing maintenance grants with loans…results in students from low-income families graduating with the highest debt levels, in excess of £57,000.”

It also said that “changes since 2012 have increased the repayments of almost all graduates, increasing the burden of student loans the most for low and middle earners”.

I have made reference to this elsewhere in the House, but the University and College Union commissioned a report from London Economics that was published on 20 July. It suggested that thousands of graduates will suffer a midlife tax crisis from the repayment of accrued interest on student loans. With a ninefold increase in inflation from 0.3% in April 2016—before the Brexit referendum—that will now get radically worse. None of these things exactly hangs out a welcome sign to young people who have got a place or hope to go to university, and that is significant.

The Sutton Trust has issued Members with a factsheet on student debt, but it has also done research that shows that in 2017, financial worries about HE were particularly pronounced, and they increased in families with low levels of affluence. Some 66% of those families were worried, as compared with 46% in high-affluence households. It is no wonder that the results of the survey of student experience by the Higher Education Policy Institute and the Higher Education Academy show that just 35% believe that their higher education experience represented good or very good value for money.

I have talked about the issues around the drop-out rate. Two recent reports from the Office for Fair Access and the Social Market Foundation point to growing drop-out rates, particularly among students from disadvantaged backgrounds. I have already referred to the Sutton Trust survey. It showed the poorest statistics in eight years for school students wanting to plan for higher education.

I will raise a point that the Government seem to neglect. I have talked before about the fact that we can nudge people away from things as well as towards them. The issue is not just a question of the increasing pressure on those who have taken out loans and how that affects their social mobility; it is also a question of how that puts off people who might want to go to higher education in the first place. By its very nature, that is much less quantifiable, but it is a real factor that needs to be discussed.

What is clearly part of the equation is the impact on part-time and mature students. The main casualties of the increase in tuition fees since 2012 from £3,000 to £9,000 have been mature students and part-time learners. In England, there has been a 60% drop in the number of part-time students since 2010-11. The Minister has said on several occasions that he thinks the argument is far more complex than that, but many people, including me, think that the statistics tell their own story. We simply cannot afford to have that haemorrhaging in the involvement of those groups.

The skills figures are stark: only 13% of the 9.5 million people in the UK who are considering higher education in the next five years are school leavers. The majority are working adults. There is a social dimension to the issue. That is underlined by the fact that one in five undergraduate entrants in England from low-participation neighbourhoods choose—or for financial reasons perhaps have no other option—to study part time. Those are the sorts of people being affected. Even the Minister’s distinguished predecessor Lord Willetts has now admitted that the decisions the Government made in 2012 to treble tuition fees—at that time, the fees were buttressed by various safety mechanisms for social mobility, but those were then stripped away by subsequent Governments—weaken that argument about social mobility still further.

Those are not good bases on which this or any Government should defend the current system. Indeed, there is a palpable and growing realisation that the Government’s settlement for higher education is divisive and financially unstable, especially in regard to tuition fees. Keith Burnett, the vice-chancellor of Sheffield University, put it sharply in a *Times Higher Education* article in June:

“With total debt forecast to hit £200 billion in six years and to pass £1 trillion by 2045, it will dwarf credit card debt”.

On the basis of the Government’s disappointing general election results—it is important we recognise that it was not just students who turned against them in a big way; it was young people in general, because the student issue and how the Government were dealing with it was seen as emblematic of their attitude towards young people in general—it is not surprising that there has been lively discussion in government about what should be done. The First Secretary of State acknowledged that student debt was a huge issue. The Leader of the House spoke about it, although she did not come forward to discuss matters properly. One of the leading members of the Government—if one is to believe what one hears, he is very much a darling of Tory activists—the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), is on record as saying in 2010 that he opposed the plans to increase fees to as much as £9,000 a year. He said “that is something I don’t believe we can allow to continue. I have always been against tuition fees. In 2005 our policy was abolition and I was one of the drivers behind that.”

That is the reality of where we stand today. The Government have conceded that the situation with fees is unsatisfactory. If they thought the current system was working well and would be sustainable in the long term, they would not have tinkered with it at the Conservative conference, where they capped the fee rise to £9,250 and increased the repayment threshold of student loans. As one of the central announcements in her conference speech, the Prime Minister committed to a review of HE funding and student finance, but the Minister has yet to reveal the details of that review. At the conference and subsequently, he seemed singularly unhappy about associating himself with the review. The Chancellor failed to mention it in the Budget, so will the Minister let us know the terms of reference for the review? Will it be a full consultation? When will it be brought back?

Jim Fitzpatrick: I know that the further education sector is very close to my hon. Friend’s heart. I just left the reception of the London region of the Association of Colleges where there was great dismay that the Government have been almost silent on the future arrangements for the further education sector. That is
similar to the absence of any clarity on where the Government are generally going in this whole area that my hon. Friend is outlining.

Gordon Marsden: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the situation in further education colleges, because a number of FE colleges, including in my constituency, took the leap of faith in the late 2000s—very much encouraged by the then Labour Government—and set up higher education departments. Those higher education departments must be allowed to flourish, but it seems they are bearing not only the burdens that I am talking about generally, but particular burdens because of the nature of the young people they take in. It is a double whammy, because they take in young people from poorer backgrounds, who are precisely the sort of people most likely to be put off by rising fees. They also take in older people who wish to reskill and retrain, and they too are precisely the sort of people likely to be put off. We know that because we see what is happening with the advanced learning loans that the Government introduced progressively, largely but not entirely for further education, where 60% of the money put out in those advanced learning loans—the figure has barely changed—year by year has remained the same. That is a crisis for FE colleges, but it is also a particular crisis for HE in FE colleges.

Our plans would uprate the funding to universities in line with inflation, whereas the Government’s plans basically impose a real-terms cut in funding. Of course, rising fees might have been easier to swallow if they had been put back into the system, but, again, as MillionPlus has said, and as has been referred to today, there has been no increase in direct grant available from Government for university courses in the arts, humanities, social sciences, architecture and economics to name a few of the subjects affected since 2014-15. That means universities are now required to fund programmes that previously were supported by Government, and there has been a decline in capital investment and an 80% cut in the teaching grant. Will the Minister confirm how much funding in real terms universities will lose in each of the next five years as a result of their current position and their decision to freeze fees?

Now that the Government have increased the student loan repayment threshold, whatever else it might mean for the benefit or otherwise of the students concerned, it means that they are going to miss their own RAB target by around 15%, so will the Minister confirm whether they will revise the target?

The University and College Union got it right when it responded to the Chancellor’s Budget statement. It said:

“The glaring omission from today’s speech was any support for current higher education students, or further detail on the Prime Minister’s promised review of university funding in England.”

That is why we have persistently, in both the HE and FE Bills that came through before the general election, argued the case for much greater focus on some of the groups who will be affected by that. That should go to the heart of the way in which student loans are handed out at the moment. The Minister knows that the Student Loans Company has recently been the subject of controversy, but the issue, which I will not dwell on today, of overpayments and how that has affected many students brings us back to the point that the Government and the Student Loans Company are operating a system that is beginning quite significantly to fail. If the nature of the Student Loans Company board or the Office for Students board were perhaps slightly broader than they are at the moment, more light might be shed on this area.

We appreciate the fact that the Chancellor has listened to our call for proper information sharing between HMRC and the Student Loans Company. Even though it has been postponed until 2019, I hope that that will have a major impact on the current situation. A great deal of thought needs to be given to any major changes in student finance, but the direction of travel matters. We are clear about our direction of travel. We would build bridges for people and not put barriers in their way via a series of measures that stress private good as opposed to public good and which keep people in silos.

5.54 pm

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson): I am grateful to the petitioners for giving us the chance to have this debate as well as to the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) for introducing it.

Enabling people from all backgrounds to take advantage of the opportunities provided by higher education is obviously an important goal for the Government. Since reforming the student finance system in 2012, the Government have been able to lift the enforced cap on student numbers that had been in place for many years and remove the associated cap on social mobility that it represented. We have enabled record numbers of 18-year-olds, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to start in higher education. We have also increased the total resources available to universities by about 25% per student per degree, according to the IFS. As a result of all of that, increased numbers of students stand to benefit from increased lifetime earnings of at least £100,000 more than non-graduates after tax.

[Mr Christopher Chope in the Chair]

However, it is only fair that graduates should share some of the costs associated with their education, rather than those costs falling to the taxpayer alone. The system is designed to ensure that those who benefit contribute to the costs of higher education in proportion to the benefits that they receive from it. The motion raises the question of whether we should reduce tuition fees to £3,000. In our view that would be a big step backwards. We estimate it would cost the Government an additional £6 billion a year. The Government would have to choose whether to reduce funding to universities, reintroduce a cap on the number of students who could access higher education, or ask taxpayers, many of whom will be non-graduates, to pay that £6 billion additional cost. None of those options is palatable. We need our universities to be well funded so that they can equip our graduates with the skills and knowledge that they need to contribute to our economy.

Carol Monaghan: Will the Minister give way?

Joseph Johnson: I want to respond to the points made by the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), and then I will give way to the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan). The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse clearly does not support the wholesale abolition of tuition fees, which I understand to be the present policy of the Labour party,
However, I hope he will acknowledge that the most worrying effect of reducing fees to £3,000 would be to lower the participation of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. To lower spending and to control it in the context of rising demand for what would effectively be free higher education, the Treasury would push hard to introduce student number controls that we, thanks to our present student finance system, have been able to lift under our current arrangements.

Carol Monaghan: I thank the Minister for giving way. He mentioned who should pay the fees and shoulder the responsibility for that. If we ask taxpayers, “Do you want to fund this particular student £9,000 a year to go to university?” probably their answer would be no, but if we were to say, “Do you want to have teachers in our schools, nurses and doctors in our health service and engineers working on different projects, and your taxes will fund that?” I think the answer would be different.

Joseph Johnson: The Government recognise that the cost needs to be shared in proportion to the benefits that flow from higher education. There are public benefits, which the Government make a contribution to on behalf of taxpayers, and there are private benefits, which individual students should make a contribution to. We have a mixed economy for our higher education system, which makes it sustainable and fair.

Carol Monaghan: If the Minister is suggesting that the private benefits would be an increased salary, part of the increased salary would be an increased tax, so people would be contributing via their salary.

Joseph Johnson: Indeed they would, but it is also important that they make a direct contribution that relates to the benefit they have received, which has been provided for them by a public funding contribution.

Jim Fitzpatrick: I echo the point made by the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan). In response to the Minister’s challenge to me, he is right: I do not support full abolition, but neither do I support the £9,000 level. I think there is a balance to be struck. On his comment that the Treasury presses hard, I know it does. I have been in government; the Treasury always presses hard. The political choice that one makes, and that the Treasury and the Cabinet make, is how far it is allowed to press, and where the trade-offs are. The hon. Lady says that there should be contributions from elsewhere. The health service has suggested that we have golden handcuffs for those who want to qualify as doctors, and free them from their tuition fees to get them into the NHS and keep them there for the rest of their professional lives. Those choices and judgments have to be made.

Joseph Johnson: I would just note that higher education is a devolved policy responsibility in the United Kingdom. Those parts of the United Kingdom that have the present level of fees that we have in England have been able to lift student number controls. Other Administrations, which have made their own policy choices, have not been able to lift student number controls. As a result, under those Administrations we have seen far lower levels of widening participation than we currently see in England. We genuinely think that returning to a cap on student numbers would be absolutely disastrous for young people from lower income backgrounds.

Richard Graham: One crucial element in danger of being overlooked is that the lifting of the cap on student numbers has been extended in a particular direction, very constructively across the country. I refer to the policy on nursing degrees, and the new policy of nursing associates that complements it. Were it not for that, frankly my county of Gloucestershire, and those like it, would have a net deficit of about 350 new nurses per year. With the new policy, the University of Gloucestershire has been able to offer nursing degrees. Over time, that will result in far greater numbers of home-grown nurses than previously, and I am grateful to the Government for that.

Joseph Johnson: My hon. Friend is right: putting the funding of nursing places on to the sustainable basis that other students are on will enable far greater participation, and result in an uplift in the numbers of nursing students in this country.

Taxpayers already contribute around half of the costs of the higher education system. We believe that it is right that graduates should also contribute, and that that contribution should be linked to their income. As I have said, that means that those who have benefited the most from their education repay their fair share. The hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) gave us interesting insights from Latin America, which I know is a source of great inspiration for those in the Labour party at present. We look with interest to see what other lessons he draws from Venezuela and countries from that part of the world, as Labour develops its ever-shifting policy on higher education.

Every year, the Government consider the appropriate maximum level of tuition fees, and sets a cap. The Government consider whether the maximum tuition fee amounts should be uprated in line with inflation, to support continued investment in course delivery. We are committed to ensuring the ongoing sustainability of our world-class higher education sector. The student finance system ensures that teaching in our universities is well funded, but that individuals do not pay until they are seeing a good return on their investment. As I said, continued investment in the higher education sector has seen funding per student per degree increase by 25% since the 2012 reforms.

What is more, funding per student is today at the highest level it has been in almost 30 years. The recent decision to freeze the maximum level of tuition fees in the 2018-19 academic year takes account of the views of young people, their parents and Parliament. We have evaluated the current position of our universities, and on that basis, we have decided not to uprate tuition fees by inflation for the 2018-19 academic year. Students will therefore see maximum fees of around £300 less than if the maximum fee had been uprated with inflation.

The hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) mentioned that his constituents were struggling to repay the cost of their higher education. To help him put it in context, as a result of our decision to increase the repayment threshold to £25,000 with effect from April next year, if one of his constituents earns £30,000 per year,
that constituent will be repaying about £1.20 per day. We think that is a reasonable amount for someone on that level of income to repay as a contribution towards the cost of their higher education.

**Alex Sobel:** Is it not correct that those earning far more will end up paying less because they will repay their loan much more quickly? The total amount of interest that they pay will therefore be far less than somebody on £25,000, who will take much longer to repay their loan.

**Joseph Johnson:** That is right. The amount that someone repays is linked to the amount that they earn in any one year, and the repayment will be more rapid for someone on a higher level of income.

The current student finance system removes the financial barriers for those hoping to study, and avoids students facing upfront tuition fee costs. We have maintained the universal accessibility of the system, which allows all eligible students to access the required finance, regardless of their background and financial history. Critically, monthly repayments depend on income, not on interest rates on their debt, or on the amount borrowed. From April 2018, we will increase the repayment threshold to £25,000, and adjust it annually in line with average earnings after that. That change will benefit around 600,000 borrowers, and will continue to benefit future borrowers. Many borrowers who have already graduated will see their monthly repayments reduced. That change forms part of a considered and costed proposal that reinforces the principles of our student finance system, and puts money back in the pockets of graduates.

**Richard Graham:** Those changes are important and will make a difference to a large number of people. There are, however, two matters on which my hon. Friend knows we do not entirely agree. One is the interest rate. When student loans revert to being repaid on a higher level of income.

**Joseph Johnson:** My hon. Friend raises some interesting points. A longstanding feature of the system has been that it uses RPI, as that includes costs that are relevant to the basket of goods and services that students consume, including housing costs and mortgage interest costs. That is why RPI has been embedded in the student finance system historically.

International students make a massive contribution to our higher education system, economy and society. They enrich the learning experience, and the Government welcome them warmly. We wish to see more international students do postgraduate courses. The Government are taking steps to ensure that we have a competitive offer for international students, so that we continue to be competitive around the world in attracting international students.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North West suggested that the tighter controls on student numbers in Scotland were not restricting opportunities there. I know that she did not want to hear about the OECD’s PISA rankings, but she may be interested in taking note of what the Sutton Trust has said about student numbers in Scotland, and how, in its opinion, they have restricted the aspiration of young people in Scotland. The Sutton Trust recently stated that “Scottish 18 year olds from the most advantaged areas are still more than four times more likely to go to university than those from the least advantaged areas” in Scotland. In comparison, they are 2.4 times more likely in England. We obviously take note of the hon. Lady’s points, but she should not give the impression that social mobility in Scotland is being advanced by higher education policy there to a greater extent than by our policies in England.

**Carol Monaghan:** As I explained in my speech, much of the data on student movement is not captured by UCAS figures and is therefore not captured by the Sutton Trust’s report, so it is simply not a true reflection of the picture in Scotland.

**Joseph Johnson:** I take note of the hon. Lady’s comments. The Sutton Trust has been engaged in this area of study for many years and has had plenty of opportunity to take on board points from her party over the years, but it has evidently chosen not to do so.

The Government remain committed to widening participation in HE. England’s sustainable student finance system has enabled record numbers of disadvantaged 18-year-olds to benefit. As my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) noted, in 2016 disadvantaged 18-year-olds in England were 43% more likely to go to university than they were in 2009, and the application rate for disadvantaged 18-year-olds increased to a record high once again in the 2017 entry cycle.

**Matt Rodda:** I am grateful for the Minister’s wide-ranging discussion of the issues. Will he meet employers from my constituency, and possibly from other high-cost areas, to address the issue that my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) mentioned—namely, that graduates on middle incomes may end up paying more in tuition fee repayments over time than those on the highest salaries, and that that may have a damaging effect on local economies? I would be very grateful if we could meet the Minister and officials to discuss that matter.

**Joseph Johnson:** I am always happy to discuss these matters with colleagues. I will be keen to do so.

There is always more to do on widening participation, including on the progression of disadvantaged students to more selective institutions and ensuring that the retention, success and progress of some of those students is better. Universities have committed to spend £860 million on improving access and success for students from disadvantaged backgrounds through access agreements...
agreed for 2018-19 with the independent director of fair
access. Through the Higher Education and Research
Act 2017, the Government introduced measures to make
further progress, including a statutory duty on the new
regulator—the Office for Students—to have regard to
equality of opportunity in connection with access to
and success in higher education for students from
disadvantaged and under-represented groups. We have
also created a director for fair access and participation
within the OFS as an executive board member.

Access and participation plans—the successor to access
agreements—will ensure that any provider wanting to
charge higher fees must have a plan agreed before they
can do so as a condition of their registration with the
Office for Students. The Act also created a transparency
duty for all providers, which means that they will have
to publish application, offer, acceptance, completion
and attainment information, broken down by gender,
ethnicity and socioeconomic background, so that all
students can make an informed choice about which
university they attend and so universities can see where
they need to make further progress on widening access.

In his thoughtful speech, the hon. Member for Blackpool
South (Gordon Marsden) rightly mentioned the numbers
of part-time and mature students, as he has done on
many occasions when we have discussed these matters.
Studying part-time and later in life can bring enormous
benefits for individuals, the economy and employers.
That is why the Government are taking steps to help
hard-working people who want to gain new skills and
advance their careers by studying part time. The
Government intend further to enhance the student finance
package for part-time students by introducing part time
maintenance loans in 2018-19. In the 2017 Act, we
enshrined the need for the new higher education sector
regulator to have regard to part-time study.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned drop-out rates.
Access to higher education is only one aspect of improving
social mobility. The full benefits of gaining a degree are
experienced only by those who actually complete their
studies. Non-continuation rates for UK students at
English institutions are lower now than they were in
2009-10 for all categories—young, mature, disadvantaged
and black and minority ethnic students. Although progress
has been made, the Government continue to look carefully
at this area and are working with universities to focus
on improving retention via the access agreement process
and the teaching excellence and student outcomes
framework, one of whose core metrics is non-continuation
and drop-out rates, as the hon. Gentleman knows.

The Government are committed to removing access
to finance as a barrier to entering higher education,
which is why we continue to make more money available
to students than ever before. Many hon. Members
mentioned living costs. Students who started their courses
this academic year—2017-18—have access to the highest
ever amounts of funding to support their living costs at
university. Our system deliberately targets living cost
support at those from the lowest income families, who
need it most. Replacing maintenance grants with loans—
the theme of several Members’ remarks—enabled the
Government to increase support for full-time students’
living costs by 10.3% for students on the lowest incomes
in 2016-17, with a further 2.8% increase in such support
for the current year.

With a view to the future, we are further strengthening
our approach to widening participation by placing an
overarching duty on the Office for Students to consider
the promotion of equality of opportunity in relation to
access and participation in all that it does. The new
director for fair access and participation will have a
clear role within the Office for Students to look across
the student lifecycle.

The current student finance system is achieving our
aims of widening participation and increasing the income
that goes to the sector. As I said, funding per student,
per degree is up 25% since the funding reforms at the
beginning of the previous Parliament. The university
system is better funded than it has been at any point
over the past 30 years. The progressive nature of the
system is ensuring that higher education is open to all
people who have the potential to benefit from it. In all
of this, the Government are ensuring that the costs of
our system are split fairly between graduates and other
taxpayers, with graduate contributions linked to income.

The current system has allowed the sector to grow
and has made higher education accessible to a greater
number of 18-year-olds from disadvantaged backgrounds
than ever before. Reducing or abolishing fees would
take us back to the days of underfunded universities
and limited access for disadvantaged students, and would
inevitably result in often hard-pressed taxpayers paying
the bill for a system that would benefit the few, not the
many: bad for students, bad for universities and poor
value for money.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 182953 relating to
university tuition fees.

6.18 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Dr Elsie Inglis and Women’s Contribution to World War One

9.30 am

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered Dr Elsie Inglis and the contribution of women to World War One.

As always, it is a great pleasure to be in a debate with you in the Chair, Mr Davies. I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for allocated time for this important debate in this important week for remembering Dr Elsie Inglis. She was a truly historic and remarkable woman—an Edinburgh woman, no less, and very proud of her roots. This week is the centenary of her death and of the state funeral that she was afforded, which will be re-enacted tomorrow.

Who was Dr Elsie Inglis? Born in India in 1864, she was the daughter of John Inglis, a chief commissioner in the Indian civil service. She studied medicine at Dr Sophia Jex-Blake’s then newly opened Edinburgh School of Medicine for Women and was one of the first women in Scotland to finish higher education, although she was not allowed to graduate. She went on to complete her training under Sir William Macewen at the Glasgow Royal Infirmary.

The now famous exhortation, “My good lady, go home and sit still”, was the response that Dr Elsie Inglis received when she asked the War Office whether female doctors and surgeons could serve in frontline hospitals in world war one. At that time and for many years to come, that was the attitude that women faced in making vital contributions to society.

Despite attempts to repress her efforts—and those of many other women—to contribute, Elsie did not, in the words of the exhortation, “sit still”. Instead, she persevered, setting up the Scottish women’s hospitals, which were all-female units that played a vital role with Britain’s allies, including the French, the Belgians and, particularly, the Serbs.

Elsie was 50 when war broke out and she defied British Government advice by setting up female-staffed field hospitals close to the frontlines. She travelled to France within three months of the outbreak of war, and the Abbaye de Royaumont hospital, containing some 200 beds, was in place by the end of 1914. That was followed by a second hospital, at Villers Cotterets, in 1917. Tens of thousands were helped by the hospitals she set up in France, Serbia, Ukraine and Romania, acting with the support of the French and Serbian Governments.

Prior to that, Elsie was a strong advocate of women’s rights and a leading member of the suffragette movement in Scotland, playing a notable role in the establishment of the Scottish women’s suffragette federation in 1906. She fought energetically against prejudice and for the social and political emancipation of women, and had already made a huge impact in Edinburgh by working in some of the poorest parts of the city with women and babies who were in desperate need of help. Selflessly, she often waived the fees of patients who could not afford to pay.

Politically, Elsie was a staunch campaigner for votes for women, and her involvement in the suffragette movement prompted her to raise money to send out to female doctors, nurses, orderlies and drivers on the frontline. She recorded many great achievements, including setting up 14 hospitals during the war—staffed by 1,500 Scottish women, all volunteers. Most notably, Elsie raised the equivalent of £53 million in today’s money to fund greatly needed medical care for those on the frontline. Her efforts reached across the waters on another level, attracting volunteers from New Zealand, Australia and Canada. As I am sure everyone would agree, that showed fierce independence and capability from women who were well ahead of their time.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this timely debate and on ensuring that it coincides with the anniversary. This type of discussion, debate and acknowledgement is significant, given the issues that he mentioned. For example, we must not only pay tribute to the many voluntary detachments of women in the first world war from all across the UK, including Scotland and Northern Ireland, but ensure that future generations never forget the contributions that they made.

Ian Murray: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s intervention. Commemorating the centenary is easy, but we need to ensure not only that the education and commemorations run right through society, in schools and workplaces, but that all four corners of the United Kingdom commemorate the contribution of women—and indeed, of everyone, including those who made the ultimate sacrifice in giving their lives.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. Does he agree that we need to learn lessons not necessarily only from the extraordinary contribution that women made during the great war and the social strides that they made in that time, but from what happened during the peace? It is certainly the case that many of the advances retreated in the immediate post-war era and into the 1920s, and in many ways women were set back to where they were in 1914. As we approach the centenary of the end of the great war, perhaps we need to give thought to what happened shortly thereafter.

Ian Murray: Absolutely. As the hon. Gentleman said, we should commemorate not just the contribution that women made during the wars, but the contribution that they made subsequently. Indeed, in this very building, Emily Davison is commemorated downstairs for her contribution to the suffragette movement. I am very much of the view that if more women had been running the world, perhaps the great wars would never have happened.
Dr Elsie Inglis and Women’s Contribution to World War One

Dr Murrison: I think the hon. Gentleman might have misunderstood my point. In the years following the great war, many advances that women had made and the position that they had established for themselves in society sadly took a step back. People such as Dr Inglis, who had become very prominent, were in fact told to take a back seat, particularly when the men came back from the war.

Ian Murray: Absolutely. Women are still fighting the same battles today. The advancement that they made during the great war was almost forgotten, until the second world war, of course, when women again played a significant role. We need to remember their contribution not just during the war efforts, but in between. That is part of the story of the commemorations and the story we should tell of our recent history.

The women’s dedication to help thousands of badly injured men in dire conditions is commendable. In Serbia in particular, the typhus epidemic had gripped the country, and without those women many tens of thousands—if not hundreds of thousands—of lives would not have been saved. Serbia was home to the first Scottish women’s hospitals field unit in 1914. Despite the life-threatening conditions of the typhus epidemic, to which four staff from the Scottish women’s hospitals had lost their lives, Elsie went to serve in the hospital on the frontline. Sent out to look after 300 beds, Elsie and her team were in fact faced with 550 beds filled with injured and ill soldiers. With a dreadful lack of sanitation in the overcrowded hospitals, Elsie faced the Serbian officials and firmly refused to let the overcrowding endanger the lives of patients and nurses. A true heroine, she went from negotiating with Serbian officials to finding innovative ways to deal with the overflow patients at the hospital, without a second thought for her own safety. Her colleagues took the same approach.

Even after the beginning of the great retreat, in which Serbia was invaded by the Austrian army, Elsie and many of her volunteers refused to give up. Again, she defied demands from the British Government to return home. Despite finding out that she had cancer—I stress that she had cancer as well—she set up two more field hospitals. In 1915, she was captured and repatriated, but still did not rest until Serbian soldiers were guaranteed safe passage out of Serbia. Once this safe passage had been granted and the soldiers arrived in Newcastle, Elsie battled through the pain of her own illness to greet them. Sadly, she passed away on 26 November 1917.

It has been said that Dr Elsie Inglis “made Florence Nightingale look like a part-time care assistant”. Her fierce dedication to helping others leading up to the great war shows that Elsie really was a role model in her own right. I am pleased that my constituents in Edinburgh and people in the rest of Scotland have such an outstanding figure to look up to and aspire to. Elsie broke down barriers and proved time and again that women will always be an integral part of society. She continually praised the work carried out by her many volunteers, refusing to think of her effort as any greater than theirs. Elsie never asked them to do something that she would not be willing to do herself. She took part in the most menial tasks and always worked as part of the unit.

Elsie’s humbleness about the great things that she achieved is why I feel so strongly about remembering her legacy and giving her and other women who contributed to world war one the recognition and commendation they deserve. We should commemorate and celebrate her life and work.

On 29 November, 1917, Elsie Inglis was buried in Edinburgh following a state funeral at St Giles’ Cathedral, with the flags of Great Britain and Serbia placed on her coffin, the lilies of France around her, and the torn banners of Scotland’s history hanging over her head. She was later awarded high honours by France, Russia and Serbia. Indeed, in Serbia, Dr Inglis and her colleagues are regarded as heroes and saints, with 17 statues to her in Serbia alone.

The UK should properly recognise Dr Inglis and the other unacknowledged British heroines who set up the Scottish women’s hospitals during the first world war. To mark the centenary of her death, I am pleased that this year the City of Edinburgh Council has decided to name a street after her and that the Edinburgh Evening News is running a fundraising campaign to have a statue of Elsie erected in her beloved Edinburgh.

The Scottish Women’s Hospitals Trust, led by my constituent Ian McFarlane and his trustees, aims to work with the Serbian Government and the Edinburgh Evening News to get the funds to build this well-deserved and much-overdue monument. A private ceremony was held at her grave on Sunday to mark the centenary of her death. As a mark of her growing reputation, a commemoration will also take place at St Giles’ cathedral tomorrow, on the same day as her state funeral 100 years ago.

But what about the countless other women who poured compassion and dedication into saving lives during the great war? November 2017 also marks the centenary of the foundation of the Women’s Royal Naval Service. The Royal Navy became the first of the three services officially to recruit women. Expansion of the wartime Navy led the Wrens to take on tasks that the Royal Navy had previously considered beyond women’s capabilities. Women’s contributions to the war effort went from strength to strength, and many Wrens were involved in planning naval operations, including the D-day landings in June 1944.

In December 1941, the Government passed the National Service Act 1941, which allowed the conscription of women into war work or the armed forces. In 1944, some 74,000 women were doing more than 200 different jobs. Of the courageous Wrens, 303 were killed on wartime service; we should pay tribute to them and all their efforts. On 7 July 1917, the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps became the British Army’s first all-female unit. More than 57,000 women served from July 1917 to 1921, including 10,000 in France.

I would like to recognise in particular the contribution of two great Scottish women to the WAAC: Alexandra “Mona” Chalmers Watson and Dame Helen Gwynne-Vaughan. Mona was from a high-achieving Edinburgh family and was the first woman to graduate from Edinburgh University as a doctor. Helen, who studied botany at King’s College London, had deep family roots in Ayrshire and Aberdeen. As well as playing leading roles in the WAAC, they fought hard against the patriarchy to show that women must have a more equal place in society and in the world.

It is also 100 years since Passchendaele, one of the most notorious battles of the first world war, which the House commemorated last month. In just three and
a half months of fighting, an estimated 550,000 Allied and German troops were killed, wounded or lost. Around 90,000 British and Commonwealth soldiers went missing; 50,000 were buried without being identified, and 42,000 were never recovered from the fields of Flanders, which turned into an ocean of mud.

As well as paying tribute to those who lost their lives, I would like to recognise the contribution of Sister Kate Luard who served as a nurse in the second Boer War as well as being a hospital nurse at a casualty station on the western front. Sister Luard often described her work in letters from Pashendaele as “UBC”—“utter bloody chaos”. Despite the chaos, she persisted, saving countless lives. I am glad that her efforts were recognised; she was awarded the Royal Red Cross and bar. I cannot imagine what it must have been like to serve so close to the frontline under such enormous pressures, but her letters are a small insight into the passion and dedication that it must have taken to do so:

“The uproar is almost stupefying. They burst on two sides—streams of shrapnel which were quite hot when you picked them up. They came everywhere, through our canvas huts. Bursting shells are an ugly sight—black or yellow smoke and streams of jagged shells flying violently in all directions. It doesn’t look as if we should ever sleep again.”

More than 100,000 women joined Britain’s armed forces during the war. From ambulance driving to translating, women served Britain in a variety of ways; I will highlight a few more. Elizabeth Knocker and Mairi Chisholm set up their own first aid post close to the Belgian frontline at Pervyse in November 1914. Mary O’Connell Bianconi went to France in August 1917 as a member of the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry, where she worked as a driver in the St Omer ambulance convoy. After an air raid in July 1918, Molly and six of her driver colleagues drove their ambulances to pick up the wounded. Dame Katharine Furse joined the Voluntary Aid Detachment in 1909. On the outbreak of the first world war, she was chosen to be head of the first VAD unit to be sent to France. In 1917 she became the director of the newly formed Women’s Royal Naval Service.

We all know the immeasurable contribution women made back home—everything from working in munitions factories to building guns. I wish that I could identify by name each and every woman who made an enormous contribution to the great war. Unfortunately, time does not allow, but those unmentioned are by no means unnoticed. It is hard to imagine that women with such passion and hunger to help, and who spoke up when they were told to be quiet, could ever be forgotten. They most definitely helped to pave the way for future women to crack the glass ceiling.

Some important centenaries approach next year. To name a few, April 2018 will mark the formation of the Women’s Royal Air Force, an invaluable asset to the RAF in which around 32,000 women enrolled in its first two years. May 2018 marks the day that nine members of the Queen Mary’s Army Auxiliary Corps became the first British women to die on active military service when their trench was hit by a German bomb in Abbeville, France.

Many of the women whom I have mentioned saved lives through innovative thinking, putting the wellbeing of others above their own safety. They often worked under fire, in unthinkable conditions with little sleep and few resources. They offered a helping hand not because they wanted praise, but because they had valuable experience and skills to offer to those who were also putting their lives on the line for their country. I am extremely pleased to have had this opportunity to ensure that we continue to give them the recognition that they deserve, and I hope that their legacy will live on.

I will finish where I started by reading out what is on the gravestone of Dr Elsie Inglis, who is buried in Dean cemetery in Edinburgh:

“To the beloved and honoured memory of Elsie Maud Inglis. Born 1864, died on active service 1917. Surgeon, philanthropist, patriot, a leader of the movement for the political emancipation of women and founder of the Scottish Women’s Hospitals for foreign service. Mors janua vitae”—meaning “Death is the gateway to life”.

Several hon. Members rose—

Philip Davies (in the Chair): Order. There are six people seeking to catch my eye in this debate. I will call the Front Benchers from 10.30, so we have 45 minutes to divide between six people. Members can do their own arithmetic, but that is about seven to eight minutes each. I will not impose a time limit at this stage, but I hope that people will bear other contributors in mind.

9.46 am

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate and thank the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) for securing this debate on an important part of our world war one history that at times is unfortunately overlooked. The contribution made by women in the great war, in particular Dr Elsie Inglis, should not be understated, and it is a pleasure to pay tribute to them today.

As the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk, I am proud to draw Members’ attention to the role played by women of the borders at that challenging time, especially those who served alongside Elsie. While reading about the Scottish Women’s Hospitals, I could only imagine the harrowing scenes that they saw. One of those women was Sarah Dempster Allan, born in 1889 in the small village of Sprouston near Kelso in my constituency. On the outbreak of war, Sarah joined the Scottish Women’s Hospitals and was posted to a chateau near Troyes, where she performed her duties in a canvas tent. I am sure that it felt a long way from the Glasgow Royal Infirmary, which she had left to join the cause.

Because their unit was housed in a portable tent, she was then moved to Salonika in Greece before moving on to Macedonia. Unfortunately, her time helping the Serbs was short-lived; she was forced to evacuate back to Greece, and return to the United Kingdom shortly after. Despite being born in 1889, Sarah lived well into the 20th century, dying at the age of 102. It is an honour to tell colleagues her story here today.

Of course, the Scottish Women’s Hospitals were only one way that women helped to win the war. Munitions factories, the civil service and agriculture would have been crippled by the flight of young men to fight on the frontlines had women not stepped forward to help the cause. Propaganda posters from the time give us a visual reminder of the huge need for women to do their
bit for the war effort. There can be no question but that that call was answered; Elsie is proof of that. Even when the Government refused to help her, Dr Inglis and her team went above and beyond the call of duty by travelling the 2,000 miles to Serbia to help those in dire need.

That does not even come close to giving a full picture of the time. Many women, while taking on extra practical duties for the war effort at home or abroad, had to endure tremendous heartache and sorrow. Living in constant fear of bad news from the front about their fathers, brothers, husbands, sons, uncles and cousins would have been an experience tantamount to torture, never mind living with the constant threat of invasion. We must not forget the many women who set up or joined branches of the women's institute, women's guild and "the rural", many of which continue today, including in my constituency, as part of that important war effort. Turning surplus produce into vital rations for the frontline was as important a task as any other.

Without the contribution of women such as Elsie Inglis of Edinburgh or Sarah Allan of Kelso, our brave men on the frontline would have gone without bullets in their guns, uniforms on their backs and food in their rations; they would have been left for dead on the battlefield with their injuries unattended. Almost certainly, we would have lost the war, and we may not have been standing in this place today. As the then Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, put it:

"For this service to our common cause humanity owes them unbounded gratitude."

9.50 am

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) on securing this debate. It is timely given the important anniversaries of women's role in our history that we are celebrating and commemorating.

The contributions made by women during the first world war have long been overlooked. As we commemorate the centenary of those events, it is important that the topic receives the respect and recognition it deserves. It is important to recognise that for too long, the role of women in history in general, and particularly in conflict, has been airbrushed out—largely by men. As the European continent and much of the world descended into war, many brave soldiers and sailors, including Plymouth lads, responded to the call; they were sent overseas to the trenches or to serve their country in the Royal Navy. They were not alone in their bravery; many of Plymouth's women back home valiantly stepped in to fill the roles that had been left vacant and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South has described, took part in providing medical support.

As more men were sent to the front, women were able to move into roles that previously had not been open to them. In Plymouth, many women became the factory workers, railway guards, postwomen, tram drivers and police officers who kept Britain and Plymouth going during those dark years. That happened right across the country, not least in my area. Thanks to the support of superb local historian Chris Robinson, who writes about the role of women in Plymouth in the world wars, some of the stories of the sacrifices that women made can come to the fore.

One key role that women took up in world war one, which proved vital to our war effort, was the often dirty and dangerous work in our munitions factories. Women put their lives at risk, being exposed to poisonous chemicals and accidental explosions. In Plymouth, a technical school was established for women in that work, and within a year nearly 400 women had been trained there in how to create munitions and were busy working on production lines in Union Street, Prince Rock and Bull Point. Women carried out that important work, helping the allies in their endeavours to outgun the central powers. The great travesty is that women were thanked for that service by receiving less than half the wages of men doing similar work.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I pay tribute to the women of Glasgow who worked in the munitions factory. At the start of world war one, about 15,000 women were reckoned to work there; by the end, over 65,000 women were working there and playing a vital role in supporting the Army as they went forward. I place on record my tribute to those women of Glasgow.

Luke Pollard: There are many untold stories of women's contributions to the war effort that need to be told across the country, including in Scotland.

A further way in which women contributed to the war effort came with the establishment of the women's police service, which was set up by Margaret Damer Dawson in 1914. Damer Dawson had worked towards establishing a female presence in the police force for a number of years, but the war provided a new opportunity. The WPS was Britain's first uniformed women's police service, and within the first three months there were 50 recruits in Plymouth. That voluntary service of spirited women paved the way for the first official female police officers a few years later. One of the first to join up and serve in the WPS was Plymouth's Nancy Astor, who is celebrating her own anniversary in two years’ time as the first female Member of Parliament to take her seat and who represented the seat that I now represent. She opened the door for more women to stand for election, and her service to our country started in the women's police service in Plymouth.

I pay tribute to the people who have worked so hard over the last year to recognise the role of women in world war one, in particular the volunteers and staff from Plymouth City Council and Plymouth Museum who have expertly welcomed visitors and told stories of men and women's services to our armed forces at the Commonwealth War Graves ‘Poppies: Wave’ on Plymouth Hoe. That memorable and moving installation created a wave over our war memorial and is a fantastic example of how to use the ceramic poppies. It provided an opportunity for events and discussions about the people named on the war memorial, who were predominantly men, and the untold stories of women who contributed.

Earlier this year, shortly after being elected, I tabled a number of parliamentary questions about the role of women in public life and in particular about the number of statues that we have of women. As 50% of the population, it is right that 50% of the stories that are told are about women. I understand that the Department
does not keep central statistics on the number of statues or pieces of public art dedicated to women from history, but given the anniversary of women getting the right to vote next year and the 100th anniversary of Nancy Astor’s election in 1919, now might be a good time to start, so we can begin to correct that and to tell the story of women’s role in public life.

When we commemorate the anniversary of the first world war, it is important to remember the brave men and women up and down the country who gave their service to our country, not only those who fought on the front or at sea, but those who fought on the home front as well. I hope that this debate concludes with the erection of the statue and the memorials that my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South spoke about, and that it enables us to talk more profoundly and clearly about the role of women in world war one, which has been far too overlooked to date.

9.56 am

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): It is, as always, a great honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard). I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) on securing this timely and important debate.

Dr Elsie Inglis made an enormous contribution to humanity. She set up hospitals that helped thousands of injured men, women and children, combatants and civilians, who were caught up in the horror of world war one in Serbia. She battled to improve hygiene and cleanliness against typhus and other diseases. It is also beholden on us, however, to give credit to her political thinking and the women’s suffrage movement, in which she became involved in the 1890s to protest about the grossly inadequate medical facilities available to women at the time. That led directly to her founding the medical school for women.

We have heard Members speak eloquently about Dr Inglis, a woman who led in making a better world, but I will take this opportunity to discuss a colleague of hers, Bessie Dora Bowhill, another woman who organised and improved others’ lives. She was the daughter of a prosperous farmer in Berwickshire, then part of the constituency of the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont). She was born on 12 April 1869 at Marygold in the parish of Bunkle and Preston.

John Lamont: May I correct the hon. Gentleman’s pronunciation of “Marygold”? I wish to ensure that the official record is accurate.

Martin Whitfield: I am grateful for that intervention. Bessie’s parents retired to Dunbar, which was then part of the constituency of Berwickshire but is now part of East Lothian. Bessie embarked on a nursing career that took her not only all over Scotland, but on two major overseas adventures. She trained in Edinburgh in the 1890s and she was night superintendent at the Aberdeen Royal Infirmary until May 1900, when the Boer war started. She enlisted in Princess Christian’s Army Nursing Service Reserve and was sent to the No. 13 Stationary hospital outside Durban in South Africa, where she served for the duration of the Boer war. On her return, she worked in hospitals in Falkirk, Dundee and again in Aberdeen before being appointed matron of Perth Royal Infirmary in 1909.

After the outbreak of world war one, she volunteered with Dr Elsie Inglis in the Scottish women’s hospital in Serbia, where she retained her senior position as matron of the unit and served until 1916. When she returned home, our local paper carried Bessie’s report of her ordeal, “Dunbar Nurse’s Experience in Serbia A Tale of Privation and Adventure”, in her own words, including the following account:

“At night the Prussian Guards simply walked into the town without any fuss whatever, and took it. Dr Inglis and her staff were told to prepare beds for 50 Germans, and next morning we received orders to leave the hospital to them. Only half-an-hour was given to us to get out, and all we were allowed to take was our beds and bedding.”

Bessie was awarded the British War Medal and the British Victory Medal for her work in Serbia. She was also awarded Serbia’s Cross of Mercy.

After that, Bessie slips from the historical record. Perhaps she was unable to carry on in nursing after what she witnessed in Serbia. I have found only two subsequent mentions of her: on 26 February 1916, the minutes of the Scottish Matrons Association record that its members agreed to send her a telegram to express their admiration for her heroism; and on 10 June 1916, she hosted tea at her nurses’ home. She died in York on 12 September 1930, aged 61.

I raise Bessie’s case today to highlight the enormous contributions made by women, which far too often go unnoticed and without thanks, but which have been crucial to shaping and deciding the future of us all, and often illuminate and focus the true meaning of moments in history. I think of the strength of the contribution made by women during the miners’ strike of 1984-85.

The roots of the strike go back to the aftermath of the devolution debacle in the 1970s. The Labour Government fell in 1979, when they were defeated by one vote in a vote of no confidence; Scottish National party Members were among those who voted against them. The result was the 1979 election and the victory of a Conservative Government under Britain’s first female Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher. In 2014, in moving a motion in the Scottish Parliament on the miners’ strike, Iain Gray said:

“With so much at stake, it was no surprise, then, that when the dispute came, it was not just any strike... In East Lothian, the Labour club was turned over to the strikers as their headquarters and soup kitchen. The Co-operative was generous to those who were its members as well as its customers. The Royal Musselburgh Golf Club felled its trees for fuel and the council set up a hardship fund.

The wider labour movement mobilised too, in practical ways, collecting food and money to keep the miners—”.—[Scottish Parliament Official Report, 20 March 2014; c. 29224.]

Philip Davies (in the Chair): Order. I have given the hon. Gentleman a little latitude, but he seems to be straying from the title of the debate; the miners’ strike is quite some distance from Dr Elsie Inglis and the contribution of women to world war one. If he got back to the subject, I am sure we would all be grateful.

Martin Whitfield: I accept your guidance from the Chair, Mr Davies; I merely wished to reiterate that the contribution made—often silently—by women during world war one and subsequently has often gone unheard in a history written by men.
Millicent Fawcett, an English suffrage organiser from Dr Inglis’ time, described the suffrage movement, in words that are still so apt today in the fight for justice and equality for all, as “like a glacier; slow moving but unstoppable”. We must remember and celebrate the bravery, intelligence and service of women such as Dr Elsie Inglis and Matron Bessie Bowhill, of women who supported the miners’ strike by setting up the soup kitchens, and of women today.

Martin Whitfield: I am grateful for that intervention. We must remember women such as Dr Inglis, but also women today who suffer under universal credit, zero-hours contracts and ill health, but fight for others before themselves. Whether through imaginative thinking, fighting typhoid or promoting cleanliness, they have always supported and served others before themselves. I hope that the battle will be won for women sooner rather than later.

10.4 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to speak in Westminster Hall debates. I congratulate the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) on presenting his case so well. It is no surprise that we all support and served others before themselves. I hope that the debate gives us a timely opportunity to do so, almost 100 years to the day since Dr Inglis’ death.

Some may wonder what an Ulster Scotman has to say about the contribution of Dr Inglis and women in general to the war world. It can be summed up very briefly: I have to give sincere thanks and honour the memory of a lady who was one of a generation of women who won the war on the home front, and whose memory should be honoured when we mention any victory in the war. It is good to have that on the record. A well known saying that I use often and that is certainly true in my case is that behind every good man is a better woman. Behind every victory in the world war was a woman at home, keeping the home fires burning, the cattle milked and the grain growing, caring for the children and continuing life.

This summer, I attended the Milwaukee Irish Fest, as I have done for the last six years; it is an honour as a Unionist to attend such an occasion. I was pleased to see Carol Walker of the Somme Association in Newtownards as a fellow speaker on the list. Her topic was the role of women in the first world war, and she has been kind enough to provide me with her notes on the topic. They are fascinating and give a small insight into the wealth of knowledge and experience that is available from a visit to the Somme Museum on the boundary of Newtownards in my constituency of Strangford. I encourage any visitor to my wonderful constituency to take the time to tour the museum and learn more about our vibrant history and the vital role that we played in the war.

Prior to the outbreak of the first world war, more than 800,000 women in Britain were in paid employment. The majority were in low-paid jobs—domestic service, agriculture or fireside industries such as sewing—and were paid 50% less than men doing the same job. That was a matter that clearly needed to be addressed and settled. In the 19th century, education reinforced the female role as that of a wife and mother, but women were increasingly beginning to make a significant impact on society as their legal and social status started gradually to improve.

By 1910, universities in Ireland were admitting women to all courses, and by 1914 education was much more open to women, but it was mainly the wealthy who could enjoy the benefit. Middle-class women tended to take “respectable” jobs, such as governess or teacher. Irish women had a long informal involvement in politics in the 19th century, with many participating in food riots and agrarian societies. The general progress being made by women throughout society allowed them to become more actively involved in the political issues of the day, such as home rule. Many thousands of Unionist women signed a declaration against home rule in 1912—indeed, more women signed than men.

I would like to talk about two ladies. One notable local political woman was Winifred Carney, a suffragist, trade unionist and Irish independence activist who was born in Bangor but moved to Falls Road in Belfast. She was in charge of the women’s section of the Irish Textile Workers Union, where she met James Connolly and became his personal secretary. Winnie was also a member of Cumann na mBan and was present at the General Post Office during the Easter rising of 1916. She probably had a “road to Damascus” experience, as she later married George McBride from Belfast, an Orangeman and a member of the Ulster Volunteer Force. Such is the history of our politics in Northern Ireland! George had served with the 36th Ulster Division at the Battle of the Somme.

The overall lack of women’s involvement at the higher levels of pre-war politics resulted in ignorance of women’s issues. A major issue was the right to vote. On 4 August 1914, war broke out and changed the role of women. The first world war was a time of huge social change, particularly for women. It was the catalyst to speed up changes that were already happening. Some 80,000 women had volunteered for war service by 1918. Initially, they were not allowed to go to the front, but more than 25,000 women served there in different roles, including as nursing auxiliaries.

Jessie Getty from Newtownards, the main town in my constituency, joined the Ulster Volunteer Force nursing corps in 1913 and went on to enlist in a voluntary aid detachment on the outbreak of war. Jessie served at the military hospital in Wimereux during the first world war and, like so many others went on to marry a soldier whom she had nursed back to health.

During the war years, many women were prominent in supporting war charities such as the Red Cross and sailors’ charities. Buffets were regularly provided for returning soldiers by ladies at the railway stations and docks in Belfast. In the old town hall, they packed parcels and dispatched them fortnightly to Ulster prisoners...
of war. Clearly, women were very active; they may not have been at the front in large numbers, in battle or in nursing care, but at home they were very much holding the reins. Nurses worked long hours looking after wounded sailors and soldiers in the accommodation provided by the UVF hospitals; that is an enormous part of our history, too.

Many married women found that their husbands returned from the war with serious mental as well as physical injuries. Today, such issues are addressed more than in the past—in those days they were perhaps unknown. Many men were treated for the effects of neurasthenia, but for countless others no support was sought or provided. In those days we clearly did not have the level of care that we have at least the potential for today. Many were left to cope alone with flashbacks, night terrors and severe depression, and a great strain was put on family life and relationships.

The first world war was a watershed for women, especially in relation to new employment and enhanced voting opportunities. The work of the suffragettes and women's contribution in war made it apparent that a change in the laws concerning elections was needed, but that was slow to happen. Overall, even though more women were becoming involved in trade unions, women were still employed on lower wages than men—often half the male rate. That is still a battle to be fought today, for some.

Time has beaten me, but I conclude by again highlighting why this Ulsterman is speaking on this topic: I recognise today, for some.

10.10 am

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I thank the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) for securing what, for me, is a crucial debate.

I admit that before I heard about the campaign for the Elsie Inglis memorial in Edinburgh I knew little about her. As I heard more and was drawn in, I was astonished at the contribution she had made and moved by what she had done, not just for the many soldiers she saved or eased through the horrific suffering and death of the first world war, but for me and my generation. As has been mentioned, the centenary of that great war is coming up next year, but there is another centenary, that of the Representation of the People Act 1918, and Elsie Inglis was at the forefront of campaigning on both.

In Edinburgh, Elsie Inglis was one of eight women—the others being Sophia Jex-Blake, Isabel Thorne, Edith Pechey, Matilda Chaplin, Helen Evans, Mary Anderson and Emily Bovell—who campaigned for the right of women to practise medicine in the city. I wonder where we would be today without them. They led the way, and so many women have been able to follow and do so much. Elsie Inglis was a role model for the women of that period of our history, and her achievements have been vital to our very survival as a nation.

Before I do that, however, I want to reflect on the fact that now, of course, world war one is a war of history not of memory and, for many, the conflict is characterised by the slaughter in the trenches on the frontline. It is incredibly important that we commemorate that aspect of the campaign, but this debate has provided a timely reminder of the extraordinary contribution made by women over that period in history and the process of social change that was unleashed by the conflict.

I was pleased to see the hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Mr Morrison) in the debate earlier. I have had the pleasure of supporting some of the work he has been doing in commemorating the centenary of the first world war, and during that process I have had the opportunity to look at many amazing and extraordinary stories of the contributions made by women throughout that period of our history, many in Yorkshire and in my constituency of Barnsley. But one woman particularly caught my attention and I want to tell her story.
This is the story of a woman called Mary Barbour; some hon. Members will know it. Mary lived in Glasgow, and politics meant as little to her as it does to some of the people most disillusioned with our politics today, but in 1914 something changed. Mary’s husband, David, went to fight on the frontline and she was left alone at home with their two young boys. With so many men away on the frontline, the city’s private landlords sensed an opportunity and cynically began hiking the rents of Mary and her neighbours, trying to make an easy profit out of people they thought could not fight back. But in Mary Barbour’s case, they messed with the wrong woman.

Working with friends, Mary organised a rent strike. Together, they led tenants into a protest that grew into one of 20,000 people and became known as Mrs Barbour’s Army. Together, they forced the Government to take immediate action to protect people from unfair rent increases—the first-ever rent protection legislation.

Mrs Barbour did not even have a vote when the war broke out, but her experiences led her to become one of the first women to represent her city as an elected councillor—as it happens, Mr Davies, a Labour councillor. Mrs Barbour did not wait for someone to tell her she could make a difference; she just did it. She did not ask for anyone’s permission to say what she knew to be right; she just said it.

Hugh Gaffney: Mary Barbour—who, along with many other great women, stood up for this country—will be getting a statue in January, in Govan, Glasgow, where she came from. The statue also includes ordinary people—Mary Barbour’s Army—marching behind her. This is the first time there will be a statue of ordinary children and women, and it will soon be unveiled in Govan, Mary Barber’s home town.

Dan Jarvis: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) made a point about the importance of commemorating the stories of women, so I am delighted to hear that the formidable Mary Barbour did not wait for someone to tell her she could make a difference; she just did it. She did not ask for anyone’s permission to say what she knew to be right; she just said it.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Mr Davies. I commend the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) on bringing the debate forward today. I am particularly pleased to speak in it not only as a woman and an Edinburgh MP, but as someone who has long held an interest in the work of Dr Elsie Maud Inglis, one of Edinburgh’s finest adopted daughters.

Elsie pursued women’s equality not just through words, but through work. She campaigned for the vote and she took part in the war, even when she was rudely told not to. Elsie did not “know her place”—she wanted to make a better world for all women. Many folk in her home city of Edinburgh, where she lived, trained and worked for much of her life, still do not know who Dr Elsie Inglis really was, beyond the name of the old maternity hospital where so many Edinburghers, including my partner, were born.

As we have heard, awareness of Elsie Inglis’s work is growing, with a local campaign in the Edinburgh Evening News gathering steam and a long-standing and relentless campaign for greater recognition led by Alan Cumming and Ian McFarlane. There are a few plaques here and there that commemorate the tremendous work of the Scottish women’s hospitals, but notably there are many more in Serbia, as we have heard. All credit to Clydesdale bank for putting Elsie’s image on its £50 notes in 2009. However, it is hardly the heights that Winston Churchill predicted when he said:

“The record of their work, lit up by the fame of Dr Inglis, will shine in history.”

I am not going to go over all Elsie Inglis’s achievements—those have been ably covered by other Members—but suffice it to say that hers is an incredible story. The grit and passion this woman and her colleagues showed in standing up to the prevailing attitudes to women and driving their plans forward regardless remain an inspiration to us all. The challenges for women at that time make her story all the more astonishing. Elsie Inglis was not a nurturing angel in the role women were expected to adopt; we remember her for her surgeon’s skills, her leadership, her tenacity and her vision, and for the impact she made on so many lives and the principles by which she lived. Elsie may have had a relatively privileged background, but she chose to take on the screaming wealth and gender inequalities of society. She was a progressive before that term became fashionable.

As convenor of culture in Edinburgh, I supported another 100th anniversary back in 2009, when there was the recreation of the 1909 Gude Cause suffrage procession along Princes Street, which I believe Elsie played a part in organising. That was such a memorable day, when we sisters and a few brothers celebrated not just the efforts of those women in gaining the vote, but the changes we have seen in the 100 years since. The accompanying “Votes for Women” exhibition at the Museum of Edinburgh—it was curated by another woman passionate about the history of the suffrage movement in Scotland, the excellent and late Helen Clark—was hugely successful and was extended by popular demand month after month.

Finally, the role Elsie Inglis and her contemporaries played in carving a path for me and other women to get involved in politics and medicine and to help build a better society for our daughters and our sons began to be more widely recognised in Edinburgh. Elsie deserves a statue in Edinburgh, at least as much as the grand generals on horses, the visiting royals clad in tartan trews or that famous terrier in the graveyard. I hope we get one, and soon. If as many Edinburgh girls and women as could manage it gave just £1 each towards that project, we would reach the target very soon. That would be a lovely tribute from those of us who owe so much of the freedoms we enjoy today to women like Elsie. However, it is even more important that her legacy is a living one, where we work to protect our NHS from privatisation, tackle poverty and inequality, and ensure that every child has the best possible start in
life. I am sure Elsie would approve of the Scottish Government’s baby box policy. One of my favourite slogans from the 1909 march, which was recreated in song for the anniversary, is: “Ye maunna tramp on the Scottish thistle”.

That mood still resonates now, and the UK Government would do well to mind it.

It is good to see at least one woman being celebrated in this Parliament, which has so often failed many, many women. I could refer to the unfairness dashed out to the Women Against State Pension Inequality pensioners, or how universal credit disproportionately targets women. There is the horrifying rape clause, the continuing disparity in wages between men and women, and many more examples. Elsie Inglis was an utterly remarkable woman who did an enormous amount of good, but she was fortunate to have started from a position of some privilege. We should be levelling the playing field and giving every woman a chance—at least a chance—of a life lived to its full potential. I am certain she would agree with that. Her great-nephew, the Reverend Hugh Inglis Maddox, said recently:

“My great-aunt spent her life showing men that women could do anything.”

Let that be her legacy.

I welcome the commemorations for the 100th anniversary of Elsie Inglis’s death. At the weekend, I—alongside our Health Minister, Elsie’s descendants and Edinburgh’s Lord Provost—attended a beautiful memorial service in Dean cemetery, where Elsie lies. It is good to see Scotland’s First Minister Nicola Sturgeon paying hearty tribute to this hero. I believe she is attending the ceremony in St Giles cathedral tomorrow. Here in London, the many roles of women in world war one are marked in a lovely, moving memorial at the Cenotaph, but among all the unsung heroes, Elsie’s is a name that deserves to be sung about—a story that deserves to be told.

10.27 am

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) on securing today’s debate. We have heard some wonderful contributions, starting with his own, followed by a speech from the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont). My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) made a good point about the statistics on the representation of women in public art; perhaps the Minister could reflect on that. Given what we have heard today, the representation of women in our public art is pitiful, and much needs to be done to rectify that, including collecting statistics. Indeed, another matter that the Minister could fruitfully give some thought to after the debate is the number of women artists represented in the Government’s art collection.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) reminded us of the role of women in the great war, but after being admonished by you, Mr Davies, he did not stray too far into the issues relating to the miners’ strike. I think the historical thread he was trying to draw out was understood by all concerned: women have made a huge contribution not only during national and international conflict, but during industrial conflict in this country.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) appropriately reminded us of the complexity of politics in Ireland at the time of the great war, embodied in the person he spoke about, Winnie Carney. That complexity is at last being much more openly acknowledged, as is the contribution that Irish men and women from all over Ireland made during the great war, prior to the Easter rising and the civil war that followed the great war. It is right that that should be much more openly acknowledged and debated in the UK and Ireland.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) said that the women are part of a “glorious thread woven through British history”, and I entirely endorse that remark, which sums up in a single phrase what we are discussing this morning. My hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) spoke about Mary Barbour, a huge figure in the “Red Clydeside” movement at the time of the great war and thereafter. Indeed, as well as the rent strike, she organised the women’s peace crusade. When discussing the great war we should also talk about the complexities and the controversy in relation to the way that war broke out and was fought.

I am glad to be here on behalf of the Labour Front Bench and pleased to be able to contribute to this important debate during the period of the first world war centenary commemorations. As we have heard, the story of Dr Elsie Inglis is remarkable. Her work in setting up women’s medical units on the western front so soon after the outbreak of the war, and her later involvement in arranging women’s despatch units to attend to other areas of fighting, is an incredible story. As a result of her work, there were 14 Scottish women’s hospitals along the frontline, where almost 1,500 women served, often in atrocious conditions, serving an estimated 20,000 allied soldiers.

Today we have heard of Dr Inglis’ drive and her initiative and compassion, all of which led her to use her skills to help others. My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South said that when she was told by the War Office to, “go home and sit still”, she turned to France for support to make her goal a reality. She also turned to the sisterhood and solidarity of the women’s suffrage organisations, which were crucial to her success, as they raised the equivalent of £53 million in today’s money in support of her cause. She is a fine example for us all to follow. Do not follow the Government’s advice at all times is one message I take from her example. We are grateful today for her service and her sacrifice, and indeed her belligerence, independence and stubbornness, which led her to carry on despite the opposition from her own Government. This month’s celebrations in Edinburgh are a fitting tribute to her work and I wish all the best for the service at St Giles’ Cathedral taking place tomorrow, which hon. Members have mentioned.

Earlier this year we had the opportunity to pay tribute in the Chamber to those who fought in Passchendaele. During that debate I was glad to be able to pay particular tribute, as a Member of Parliament representing a Welsh constituency, to the Welch Regiment, the South Wales Borderers and the Royal Welsh Fusiliers, who all fought alongside each other in the 38th Division, and to the Welsh Guards who fought in the third battle of Ypres. In Wales we particularly remember the poignant
death of the poet Ellis Evans, better known as Heddy Wyn, who was killed before he was able to claim his prize of the chair at the National Eisteddfod during the war; he was killed at Passchendaele. As ever, we remain in remembrance of their great sacrifice for the freedom and future of our country. In addition to paying tribute to the local forces as part of that debate, many Members talked of the brave work of women across the country, as well as from their particular constituencies, during the great war.

Across the UK women served at home and abroad to ensure the success of the allied forces. Many, like Dr Elsie Inglis, left for the western front to care for the wounded. In the munitions factories, as we have heard, many working-class women undertook hazardous manufacturing work. In fact, in the second world war, my father’s sister, my Auntie Mary, worked in the Currys munitions factory in Cardiff. In the first world war there were 11 munitions factories in Wales alone, and by the end of the war 80% of the workforce in those factories were women. It is a myth that women were not in paid work before the first world war. Many, like my own relatives, worked in service before getting married. Many of the women who worked in the munitions factories transferred their aprons working in service to work in overalls in the munitions factories. In that dangerous and dirty work, they found both a way to contribute to the war effort on the home front, and for many, for the first time, a way to earn a significant and stable independent income.

The percentage of women in paid work increased from 24% at the outset of the first world war to 37% by 1918. In 1917, 20,000 women joined the Women’s Land Army across the UK. In my constituency, the Green Farm became what is now the very large housing estate of Ely. That subject is quite topical in some ways, as the estate was part of the drive to build homes fit for heroes after the first world war. As a farm during the war, it was predominantly run by female farmhands. One of the workers, Agnes Greatorex, who left domestic service to work there, said:

“Every morning, we would get up at five o’clock and milk a hundred cows. We would then take the milk to Glan Ely Hospital,”

where many of the injured soldiers returning from the war were looked after. For many, such work was taken on in addition to the weight of domestic work. Although many men went to fight, women often became the breadwinner at home, bearing the brunt of the increased emotional and domestic labour of running a house and caring for a family. We should also remember that others served at home, but not in the armed forces. Like my grandfather, Edward Evans, they were not allowed to be conscripted in wartime because they worked in the coalmines, but they made their contribution serving at home. My grandmother, Gwellian Evans, worked in service and then domestically supported her husband.

Women such as Dr Elsie Inglis and Agnes Greatorex are a part of our history, and we owe them a huge debt. I should also mention some prominent women from Wales. Gwendoline and Margaret Davies are better known as philanthropists in the arts, but they worked with the French Red Cross in canteens and organised convalescent hospitals and transit camps on the frontline. Annie Brewer, a military nurse from Newport, spent the war in France and won many medals for her courage. One citation applauded her “coolness and total disregard of danger, lavishing her attention on men wounded under fire”.

That sums up some of the incredibly brave contribution made by women on the frontline during the war.

A poster during the first world war depicted a woman wearing overalls and said:

“On her their lives depend…”

Our tributes today make that same message abundantly clear. It is no coincidence that the centenary commemoration of women’s suffrage closely follows that of the first world war. As we know, the suffragettes largely suspended their organising during the war in order to concentrate on the war effort. In the end, the crucial contribution of women to the war helped change the perception of women in the UK, and in November 1918 women over the age of 30 were given the right to vote.

Given Dr Inglis’ commitment to women’s suffrage, it is particularly poignant that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South reminded us, she died a year before the passage of the Representation of the People Act. It is a great injustice that despite her historic sacrifice for our country, she never had the opportunity to cast a vote in an election to this place.

Before I close on the topic of women in the first world war, it is right to consider how these issues continue to play out today. Women’s work—their physical, professional and emotional labour—remains often underappreciated and underpaid. Of course, women play a vital frontline role in our armed forces today. We have come a long way since 1918, but it remains all too common that the contributions of women are underplayed, so I am pleased that this debate today has shone a spotlight on the accomplishments and sacrifices of so many historic women, from extraordinary actions to daily perseverance. I warmly welcome the Women’s Work100 programme, which will launch in 2018 through the First World War Centenary Partnership. I thank all the organisations involved for their hard work throughout the commemoration period, in particular the Imperial War Museum.

Our armed forces communities continue to protect us, and I am proud of and humbled by the sacrifices they still make today. At home, the UK armed forces, supported by the entire armed forces community of families, reservists, veterans and cadets, continue to support responses to terrorist incidents and to protect our aerospace. Abroad, they are currently involved in more than 30 operations in 20 countries, from supporting the European Union and UN peacekeeping missions in South Sudan, to responding to the continuing threat posed by Daesh. As we take this time today to remember the contributions and sacrifices made during the first world war, we should also remember the sacrifices that have been made every year since then and are still being made by the brave men and women of the armed forces community. We should also redouble our efforts—all of us; men and women—to work for peace.

10.40 am
the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) for introducing the debate. I know the subject is close to the hearts of many Members across the House, and that has been reflected in the nine moving and poignant speeches and the several interventions made this morning.

We have heard of the importance of Dr Inglis’s work and how it serves as one of many examples of the contributions of women to the war effort. This is a very important subject as we reflect on the first world war 100 years on. I pay tribute to my parliamentary neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), who has done so much, alongside other Members of the House, including the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), to commemorate the first world war. There has been a significant number of events, and those taking place in 2018 will be announced early in the new year.

As hon. Members have observed, Dr Inglis was a hugely inspirational woman. As one of the first female doctors in the UK, a pioneer of women in medicine and an ardent campaigner for votes for women, she is a remarkable figure in our history. The hon. Members for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) and for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) spoke about the collection of data. I am open to representations on that matter, but it is important that many commemorations have been based on decisions made in different local authorities. It is about getting the right balance between spending money and allowing local campaigns to come to fruition in the right way. A large number of commemorations that have taken place over the last few years reflected inputs from local communities. Although I do not rule anything out, there are a number of communities across our history—perhaps even ethnic minorities—whose contributions have not been reflected. There is a judgment to be made on where we draw the line on that, but I note the sensible points that have been raised.

Through the upheaval of the first world war, Dr Inglis achieved international fame for the drive, dedication and compassion that were woven into her life, as well as her determination to do what she believed was right—refusing, as the hon. Member for Edinburgh South said, to go home and sit still. She is an enduring inspirational role model for us all. Instead of sitting still, she turned her energies to establishing field hospitals for service overseas.

As has been mentioned, Serbia in particular was in dire need of doctors, and some 600 British women served there as volunteers during the war—in large part due to Dr Inglis’s pioneering work to raise awareness and funds for that cause. She arrived in Serbia in January 1915 with the Scottish women’s hospitals, and used her skill and tenacity to save lives and alleviate suffering in extremely harsh and hazardous circumstances. She demonstrated extraordinary leadership and great loyalty in refusing to abandon Serbian troops in the field, and was herself sent into German captivity with the wounded, rather than withdrawing when the opportunity arose.

I am delighted that the Scottish commemorations panel, ably led by Norman Drummond, is delivering a number of events to commemorate the work of Dr Inglis and her fellow members of the Scottish women’s hospitals movement. A wreath-laying ceremony took place on Sunday at the grave of Dr Inglis in Dean cemetery, Edinburgh, as the hon. Member for Edinburgh South mentioned. Tomorrow, a commemorative service will take place in the presence of Her Royal Highness the Princess Royal in St Giles’ Cathedral in Edinburgh, timed to start 100 years to the minute from Dr Inglis’s funeral there.

As with all its previous events, the Scottish panel has produced an historical publication, available to members of the public on its website. The impact of Dr Inglis’s contribution reflects the sacrifice and courage of so many women—something that has been raised by hon. Members across the Chamber. My hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) gave a moving and poignant account of the contribution made by individuals from his constituency. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport spoke about the work of Chris Robinson and the sacrifices made by those who worked with poisonous chemicals in Plymouth—a city that is close to my own heart, following my extensive attempt to get elected there several years ago.

The hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) spoke of Bessie Bowhill and her enormous contribution. Such contributions were often under-reported; that theme has run across many of the individuals we have discussed. We did not really know about their contribution, and that is not right.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) spoke movingly about the many women who made such strong contributions and sacrifices in difficult circumstances, and about the premature death of her own mother—as with my father—through asbestos poisoning.

In 2015, the British residence in Belgrade, as was also mentioned in some very well-researched speeches, was named in Dr Inglis’s honour, as a reflection of her service in Serbia and the historical relationship between the UK and Serbia. She was also featured on stamps issued by the Serbian Mail in 2015, along with other British women of the Scottish women’s hospitals movement. Closer to home, I understand that the Edinburgh & Lothians Health Foundation has an annual Elsie Inglis staff development award, and there is a permanent memorial to her in St. Giles’ Cathedral in Edinburgh.

Dr Inglis’s contribution also reminds us of the role played by other remarkable women who made history during the first world war, such as Gertrude Bell, who played an extraordinary role in the middle east; Edith Cavell, the nurse executed in 1915, who was commemorated in a series of events in October 2015; Flora Sandes, who also served in Serbia with the Serbian army; and Vera Brittain, the Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse, who left a powerful account of her experiences and the reality of modern war. Those well known heroines are the most recognisable women of the first world war, but we should also remember the vital role played by many less well known, but no less inspiring, women—a theme of some of this morning’s speeches.

The range of organisations established during the war reflects the range of contributions made by women, and the strength of their desire to play their part. Although it is not possible in the remaining time to recount every organisation founded by, or for, women during the war, I will highlight some of the most prominent to give an idea of the scale and breadth of their contribution.
Under military control from the start of the war, Queen Alexandra’s Imperial Military Nursing Service, and its part-time equivalent, the Territorial Force Nursing Service, were greatly expanded and served throughout the war on every front and in every campaign, often in the harshest conditions. Their professionalism and compassion feature in the recollections of many of those who experienced their care. They were supported by the Voluntary Aid Detachment of the Red Cross—staffed by both men and women—which was tasked with nursing, the administration of hospitals and rest stations, clerical and transport duties, and, in response to new developments, air raid duties. Working in Royal Army Medical Corps hospitals from February 1915, they numbered more than 82,000 members by 1920.

Women also served in the Army, the Navy and the newly-founded Royal Air Force in a range of roles previously performed exclusively by men. The Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps was formed in February 1917 and eventually numbered 57,000 volunteers. In recognition of that service, the corps was renamed Queen Mary’s Army Auxiliary Corps in April 1918. The Women’s Royal Naval Service, universally known as the Wrens, was also formed in 1917, with 5,500 women serving by 1918 in a wide range of roles. On 10 October 1918, 19-year-old Josephine Carr from Cork became the first Wren to die on active service when RMS Leinster was torpedoed by a German U-boat.

The Women’s Royal Air Force was created as part of the newly-established RAF on 1 April 1918, and 9,000 women already serving alongside the Royal Flying Corps and Royal Naval Air Service volunteered to join. Many will remember Harry Patch, the last Tommy. However, the last surviving veteran of the first world war from any country is believed to be Florence Green, who served with the WRAF in the UK and died at the age of 110 in 2012. More than 100,000 women served in Britain’s armed forces during the war.

Other auxiliary forces assisted with the war effort at home. The Women’s Land Army, formed in February 1917, provided a dedicated agricultural workforce and went on to employ some 113,000 women as field workers, carters, milkers and ploughwomen. Indeed, by the end of the war women made up around one third of all farm workers, a significant increase from the pre-war period when women were employed in some aspect of the munitions industry in larger numbers.

In the textile industry, as the demand for shells and munitions increased, women were employed in the munitions industry in larger numbers. As has been mentioned a number of times in the debate, working long hours, in difficult and sometimes dangerous conditions, women helped to supply the troops with weapons, ammunition and equipment. By 1918, almost a million women were employed in some aspect of munitions work. Women also began working in much larger numbers in the transport industry. During the war, the number of women working on the railways rose from 9,000 to 50,000. Elsewhere, they worked as bus drivers, conductors, ticket collectors and porters.

I am very pleased to say that that huge range of activity will be reflected in “WomensWork100”, a programme led by the Imperial War Museums and the Centenary Partnership. An international programme of exhibitions, events, activities and digital resources will be launched in February 2018 and will recognise and celebrate the working lives of women during the first world war. Through the stories of those who joined the workforce and against the backdrop of the campaign for female suffrage, it will use the IWM’s Women’s Work Collection to explore the breadth of women’s roles.

The creation of that collection is closely linked with the establishment of the museum. Almost immediately after its creation in 1917, the museum formed a committee to source material to ensure that the role of women would be recorded. That material included items donated by Dr Elsie Inglis’s sisters, some of which are on permanent display at the Imperial War Museum North. It is particularly appropriate that next year Imperial War Museums will be sharing stories from the collection.

The Department for Communities and Local Government, which has responsibility for commemorating women’s suffrage, has plans for a project called “Inspirational Women: Speak Up”. It will enable schools across the country to research and present content about the contribution of women to society and will include women such as Dr Elsie Inglis and Sophia Duleep Singh, who served as a Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse, tending wounded Indian troops in Brighton.

Although the courage, self-sacrifice and determination of such women is inspiring, we should not lose sight of the loss and hardship endured by women during the war, as reflected in the speech by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). In a recent debate introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris), it was noted that some 600 memorial plaques were issued to the families of women who died in the first world war in the service of their country. Each plaque represents a very personal and tragic story of loss and sacrifice.

Women’s suffrage is somewhat outside the scope of this debate, but the contribution of women to the national effort was rightly a significant factor in the passing of the Representation of the People Act in February 1918. Although I note the observations of my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire about what happened subsequently, I am sure that the IWM and DCLG programmes, as well as many other local and community projects, will reflect on that element of women’s experience during the war. The war galvanised women of all ages and social backgrounds to support the war effort and to reconsider their position in society.
We should not lose sight of the ever-present contribution of women at home and to the family, maintaining some sense of normality, or looking after the children of those who had entered the workforce.

In those respects and many others, the contribution of women to all aspects of the first world war was hugely significant. I am conscious that the debate has only touched on the many fascinating and moving stories of many millions of our forebears. I am sure that tomorrow our thoughts will turn to Dr Inglis, but as we approach the final year of centenary commemorations, we will continue to recognise and remember the huge role played by women during the first world war and ensure that it is not forgotten.

10.57 am

Ian Murray: I thank the Minister and the shadow Minister for their wonderful contributions and the moving stories they told from their personal experience. What we see from the debate—from Dr Elsie Inglis, Mary Barbour and Florence Green, whom the Minister mentioned; from Plymouth to Wales to Glasgow to Edinburgh, from Barnsley to Caithness to Northern Ireland and right across the country; from the RAF, the Army and the Royal Navy—is that the contribution that these dedicated, passionate and often modest women made to the war effort, and subsequently, without any regard to their own safety, shows that we owe them a great deal of respect and remembrance. Perhaps, if someone from the BBC is watching, they might want to change “Dad’s Army” to “Mum’s Army” and make a new comedy series about the contribution of women to the war effort.

We will see many centenaries this year and next in the run-up to the centenary of the end of the first world war. For everyone who made an effort, particularly for women, we will do two things: thank them for the service they gave this country and say that we will continue to recognise and remember the huge role played by women during the first world war and ensure that it is not forgotten.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered Dr Elsie Inglis and the contribution of women to World War One.

Voter Registration: Nottingham North

10.58 am

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered voter registration in Nottingham North constituency.

This is the first time I have served under your chairship, Mr Davies. I intend to take you on a journey to Aspley in my constituency via Athens. My topic is restricted to my constituency, but has wider applications to the rest of my city, and indeed to Shipley, Kingswood—the constituency represented by the Minister—and the rest of the country.

Our free and fair democracy is at the root of what makes us a special nation. We host the mother of all Parliaments, and in our participatory democracy we are treated all the same, whoever we are and wherever we come from. It is special, and it is to be cherished and, crucially, nurtured and developed. Democracy was established by the Athenians, but is frequently executed by people in Aspley. Democracy is strong only when it is truly participatory, which tells us something about voter turnout: if next to no one voted, the validity of the contest would be undermined. Voter participation ought to be of interest to us all, but this debate is about one specific part of participation: voter registration. Perhaps mercifully, discussions about turnout and extending the franchise will have to be left to another day.

I secured this debate to state publicly a belief of mine to see whether the Government share it. It is a simple but important statement: I believe strongly that the Government ought to prioritise the completeness and accuracy of the electoral register. That might sound like a broad statement, and it might sound uncontroversial or even facile, but it is none of those things. It is a crucial statement about our democracy, and if we accept it, I think it will act as a call to action. I will talk about some actions later, but first I want to talk about some of the challenges relating to voter registration that we face in my community and the reasons for the current situation; then I will move on to what we might do about it.

Let me start with the very basics. This is a discussion about voter registration in my constituency, Nottingham North. We know that we do not have a complete register of voters, but we do not know how incomplete it is. We do not know who or how many voters we are missing. To prepare for this debate—I have been putting in requests for many weeks, perhaps even months, since I was elected—I have been tabling questions to the Cabinet Office. The Minister may recognise them; others in the Chamber definitely will. I tabled one on 3 November to ask for the Cabinet Office’s estimates of how short we are on the electoral register in Nottingham North. I was given a holding reply on 15 November and heard back this morning—25 days later—with the answer I suspected I would get, which is that the Cabinet Office does not know. That lack of knowledge is not born out of disinterestedness or discourtesy, but it is a pretty good demonstration of where we are as a nation on this issue.

We do not know how many people are not registered; instead, we draw on global estimates. The House of Commons Library estimates that about 6 million people are missing from the register across the UK. On an even distribution, that would mean that more than 9,000 are
missing in my constituency, but when it comes to those not on the register, distribution is not even. People from poorer backgrounds in a working-class community such as mine in the north and west of Nottingham are much less likely to register to vote, so it stands to reason that in my community the number of missing voters is much higher than 9,000. That is a significant proportion stacked against the 70,000 registered to vote at the latest update. That situation significantly weakens our democracy, so it is right that we are concerned about it.

It is hard to find out the current position. I drew on the resources of our excellent local authority in Nottingham. Every year, all electoral services teams in the country are required by law to conduct an annual canvass of every property in the electoral area to ensure—we are all keen on this—that the information on the register is complete, accurate and up-to-date, but that means that local authorities are forced to spend time and resources chasing households in which the number and identity of the residents have not changed. In Nottingham, the council sends a household enquiry form. If it is unreturned, it is followed up by a further letter, and if that letter is not returned, by a visit from a canvasser. Only then can the council send an invitation to register, which again if it is not returned, is followed up by a second letter and by a canvasser after that.

That process does not strike me as very efficient. It is very challenging and it succeeds only 74% of the time in Nottingham, so it is both hard and not particularly effective. The council told me that the expense of printing and posting letters and training and paying staff is substantial, and that the administrative time it takes to process all of the responses is phenomenal. It is a real challenge. Despite all the effort that goes into it, since the introduction of individual electoral registration the Electoral Commission thinks that about 87% responded in 2017, as opposed to 93% in 2013. It is expensive, it is hard to do and it is not getting better.

An eminent individual I will name shortly said: “Currently the annual canvass costs around £65 million to conduct every year—it is too high and we must take advantage of new and emerging technology to make the process more efficient where we can.”

As I say, those are not my words. The Minister may well recognise them, because they are his. I hope he shares my view that the annual canvass is too expensive. It does not produce fully accurate registers. It is time to make changes.

The solution that the Cabinet Office offers to local authorities is to use a phone and emails as a different way of contacting households. That is sensible, but I would like us to be much more ambitious, because the consequences are significant. We know that voter registration rates remain particularly low among young people and those who live in privately rented accommodation. About three quarters of 18 and 19-year-olds and 70% of 20 to 24-year-olds are registered, compared with 95% of the over 65s. There is a real imbalance.

**Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab):** I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate and on making such a powerful case. Does he agree that one of the issues we face in Nottingham is the under-registration of students? It is clear that, since the university no longer automatically registers students who live in halls, let alone all those who live in houses in multiple occupation in their second and third years, large numbers of young people have not been able to exercise their right to vote.

**Alex Norris:** I share that view. Later, I will talk about block registration, which was a recommendation of an excellent report that I intend to draw on. For a long time, my hon. Friend and I have been out on doorsteps, carrying around our forms, desperately trying to get people to register when we meet those who have not. I think there might be a better way to do it.

The differences are even starker when we look at housing tenure. Only 63% of private renters are registered to vote—far from the 94% of those who own their own homes. Access to the ballot box ought to act as the ultimate leveller, but at the moment it does not.

Low registration can lead to a rush to register, which is the last thing that hard-pressed local authorities need. On the registration deadline before the EU referendum, the Government website crashed due to the number of people trying to register late, which led to the deadline having to be extended. I remember that that was very controversial. Similarly, people do not want to miss out, so although they may assume that they are already on the register, they may send in duplicate applications anyway. Electoral registration officers’ estimates of the proportion of duplicate applications ahead of the 2017 general election ranged from 30% of the total submitted in some areas to an incredible 70% in others. People who have registered and done the right thing are fine, but they do not know that and do not feel they can check, so they put their registration in again. That is not a sign of a healthy system. If the registration does not work, people get turned away from polling stations. At the 2015 general election, two thirds of polling stations turned away at least one person. Unsurprisingly, the most common reason for that is that they are not on the register. Again, that is not good for confidence in our democracy.

Finally—I have left this last for emphasis—all of us may have noticed the upcoming boundary changes. The electoral register has an even more crucial role in that process, because it forms the basis of our country’s electoral map. We are therefore in the process of setting new parliamentary boundaries that we know are based on flawed assumptions. We are trying to tackle imbalanced constituencies in a way that will only produce further imbalances. It is a fool’s errand. We need a really good register so we can set our boundaries properly.

What can we do about it? It will probably not be a revelation to anyone in the Chamber—especially if they have been following me on Twitter in the last 20 minutes—that I believe in automatic voter registration. I am not the only one who is enthusiastic about that idea. For several years, both the Electoral Commission and the Association of Electoral Administrators have been calling for automatic registration, as did the now-dissolved Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, which was chaired by my predecessor, Graham Allen. I promise hon. Members that there is not a gene in Nottingham North Members of Parliament that makes us interested in constitutional affairs. I am particularly interested in this one, but I cannot match the breadth of my predecessor’s interests. When I was preparing for this debate, I half-expected him to intervene at some point to clarify
something. That has not happened yet, so I will carry on, on my own. His Committee, which he led with distinction, conducted the largest public consultation ever achieved by a Select Committee, and it recommended the introduction of automatic registration. The all-party group on democratic participation recommended it, and so did the Electoral Reform Society, Bite the Ballot and Operation Black Vote. The list goes on and on, but it is not just experts: according to the Electoral Commission, 59% of people support the idea of automatic registration, and it is even more popular among younger age groups, with two thirds of 18 to 34-year-olds voicing support.

Automatic voter registration would make two transformative yet simple changes to voter registration: first, eligible citizens who interact with government agencies would be registered to vote unless they decline; and, secondly, agencies could transfer voter registration information electronically to election officials. Those two changes would create a seamless process that is less error prone and more convenient for both voters and government officials. Such a policy would boost registration rates, clean up the rolls, make voting more convenient and reduce the potential for voter fraud, all the while lowering costs.

The end game is to achieve full participation in our democracy and, as I say, an accurate system is a better way to do that, but this is not simply a theoretical exercise, something I have dreamt up at home and asked Ministers to go on, on the back of my ideas—it is already happening. In the US, they are way ahead of us. In March 2015 the state of Oregon became the first to pass a breakthrough law to register automatically eligible citizens who have a driver’s licence, but with the choice to opt out. Registration has increased since the policy was implemented, and last November voter turnout in the state was the highest for decades, and one of the highest rates in the country. Since then nine other states have followed suit and 32 of the remaining 40 are considering similar legislation.

Automatic registration is not just about the registration rate, but about accuracy and saving money. Delaware estimated that it saved $200,000 in the first year alone of implementation. We could do that too. We should unleash the collective knowledge of the state—whether of the Departments for Work and Pensions and of Health, or the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency—to wire up a system that makes a complete and accurate register.

We could build in other areas, too. Bite The Ballot and Dr Toby James, with the all-party group on democratic participation, published an outstanding report with 25 recommendations to reform our voter registration system. Published more than a year and a half ago, it was welcomed by the Government and praised by the Minister as a publication that will “go down in history as helping to evolve the UK’s electoral registration system”.

but so far only two of the recommendations have been implemented. Today I hope to hear about more, in particular the one on block registration in care homes and halls of residence. That recommendation could be introduced quickly.

We know there is emphasis on voter fraud. That played out during Cabinet Office questions last week, when there was plenty of discussion about voter fraud. Certainly, voter fraud is something that the Cabinet Office is interested in. It is a criminal offence and ought to be treated seriously—it is another way to undermine our democracy—but the evidence tells us that electoral fraud is exceptionally rare. In the past 20 years in Nottingham, exactly zero cases have resulted in people being prosecuted. In 2016 in the UK more broadly, of 260 cases of alleged electoral fraud, only two led to convictions, while 138 cases were dropped with no further action. Stand that against nearly 34 million people voting in the EU referendum and we are talking about fewer than one in 10 million people being convicted of that offence—stacked against 6 million missed off the register. Both issues are important, but I am arguing that one ought to have considerably greater emphasis placed on it by Ministers.

I hope that I have demonstrated the real challenges to registration in my constituency, the sterling efforts of our local authority, despite the considerable pressures on it and the weak hand it has been dealt, and outlined a better, evidence-based approach for Ministers to follow in the future. I am sure that the Minister will forgive me for drawing on his previous comments, and I look forward to hearing more from him.

11.13 am

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Skidmore): Thank you for your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I am grateful that you are presiding over this debate, because you too take a personal interest in electoral matters and I am sure you enjoyed the contribution from the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) as much as I did.

It is striking that although we sit on opposite sides of the political divide, I agree with much in the hon. Gentleman’s speech on electoral registration being a matter of social justice. I will touch on that later, but I am determined that, as a Government, we will look at the burning injustice for those people who are unable to access the ballot box for whatever reason. Next year, it will be 100 years since women got the right to vote, but now many people do not vote because they do not wish to—that is their freedom—although many people who want to vote will still be unable to do so. I will talk about what the Government have been doing and intend to do to improve access to registration and, therefore, to our elections.

The hon. Gentleman paid tribute to his predecessor Graham Allen. In July 2016, two days into my job as a Minister, I was here in Westminster Hall to respond to Mr Allen’s debate on the issue of a constitutional convention. I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman is following in the proud footsteps of his predecessor by taking up the matter of voter registration. It is incredibly important for that issue to be raised in the House and I thank him for securing the debate. As is evident from his recent parliamentary question to the Cabinet Office, which he mentioned, electoral registration is of interest to him, and I commend him for that.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about the issue of data. To consider what we do and do not know, at the moment we do not have the accurate data to be able to track movements of people when certain elections are taking place. I am passionate about changing the nature of the electoral registration conversation from focusing only on top-line national issues.
The hon. Gentleman mentioned the “Missing Millions” report, which I commend for highlighting the number of people missing from the register, but what we do not know is who those missing millions are and whether they are all actually missing or have gone off and registered in a different location. I am absolutely determined for us in the Government to do the work on the much finer-grained detail to achieve a more accurate picture of where we need to focus our resources. I will talk about that in connection with our democratic engagement programme for the future.

We need to move away from the national conversations on voter registration and talk about democratic inclusion versus democratic exclusion and where the democratically excluded are. The hon. Gentleman mentioned certain target groups that had traditionally under-registered and were under-represented, such as home movers. He mentioned the Electoral Commission report that highlighted the number of renters who are not on the electoral register. For me, one of the most significant statistics is that only 28% of renters join the electoral register in their first year of moving into a property. We are looking at trying to tackle that churn.

I will have to disappoint the hon. Gentleman in his passion for automatic voter registration. I am equally passionate about the system of individual electoral registration, which is here to stay. More than £70 million has been invested in putting the system in place and in enabling the successful transition to individual electoral registration. At the core of that system is the conviction that individuals should own their own registration status. When it comes to our democracy, voting and registration, I am a passionate believer in voting being not only a right but a responsibility. Gone are the days of the old head-of-the-household system, in which one individual registered numerous others; now it is the right and responsibility of each and every individual to decide when and where they want to be registered.

Individual electoral registration has proved not only more responsive to the needs of electors, but a success in making the system more robust and in driving up the accuracy of the electoral registers. The Electoral Commission report on the 1 December 2016 registers provides the best and most recent full assessment of the completeness and accuracy of the electoral registers across Great Britain.

Lilian Greenwood: The Minister may be wedded to individual registration, but will he not accept that there are some groups he needs to work much harder with? That might be those who have poor language skills or learning disabilities. They might want to register but find the process difficult. Will he commit to put in extra measures to ensure that those people who want to vote but find the existing process difficult can access it effectively?

Chris Skidmore: The hon. Lady is clearly as passionate about this issue as I am—only last week, she asked a question during Cabinet Office questions. As a Government, we are absolutely determined to ensure that by the next general election in 2022 we will have made our elections the most accessible ever. Clearly, 100 years on from women getting the right to vote, there are still those who are unable to vote. We want to be able to change that. Looking at the whole process—the journey through our democracy—from registration through to turning up at the polling station, we need to do more to make that process easier.

We had a call for evidence, and 260 people have responded so far. In the spring, we will publish a report on actions the Government intend to take forward. I have already managed to make certain changes—for example, with the certificate for visual impairment—on data held at NHS level. Last year, there was a consultation. I wrote to the Health Minister to make the case that that data should be shared with local authorities and electoral registration officers, so that when a certificate exists for those who are blind or visually impaired, it should be possible to use it to contact people in the local authority area, perhaps with forms in Braille—although it is not frequently used nowadays, and it is important to keep up with the technology when it comes to access to elections—or large print. It is about establishing who the vulnerable people are who need the extra effort and attention.

Again, it is about data and about ensuring from an early position that we can act as a Government. I agree entirely with the hon. Lady that we need extra investment in those certain groups, but we also need knowledge of those under-registered groups. We have run a knowledge and capability review to try to understand people’s needs. Since becoming a Minister, I have been touring every area and region of the country to try to understand the needs of the most vulnerable.

When it comes to individual electoral registration, the completeness of the register is stable at around 85%, but its accuracy has now increased to 91%. There is more to do. I share the hon. Gentleman’s vision of having as complete and accurate a register as possible, although I perhaps disagree about the methods to achieve that. Since 2014, 30 million people have registered to vote using the IER system, and 75% of those did so online. During this year’s general election, nearly three quarters of the 2.9 million applications were made using the register to vote website. I am sure he will join me in welcoming the fact that electors across Nottingham have engaged with this new system, mirroring the trend that we have seen nationally. Since 2014, 197,042 applications to register to vote have been submitted to Nottingham City Council—79,314 of those were from 16 to 24-year-olds—and 24,978 applications were submitted to Nottingham City Council ahead of the 2017 general election, from 18 April to 22 May.

The hon. Gentleman also touched on the issue of duplicate registrations, which the Association of Electoral Administrators has raised with me. In a way, that problem is part of the success of the register to vote website—the opportunity and flexibility that it gives to individuals to register—and the side effect is duplicate applications. At the 2017 general election, we added a page to the website that said that if people were already registered with their local authority they would still be on the register, which we believe screened about 5% of applications. However, as a Government we are determined to look at the issue. I am not convinced that a centralised database is necessarily the way forward, but we are continuing our work and we want to work closely with the AEA and the Electoral Commission on those barriers.

I addressed the AEA conference in Brighton earlier this year and I committed the Cabinet Office to holding an annual electoral summit, which will take place on
11 December, with representatives from the AEA and from the Electoral Commission, so that we can plan out the registration and democratic engagement strategies for several years. We are launching a democratic engagement programme, which will be published this side of Christmas. It is the first Government electoral engagement strategy and we are determined to ensure that, rather than focus on electoral events, when money is invested suddenly in the run-up to an election, we can plan across a five-year cycle where we need to focus our attention to help the most vulnerable people and to drive up the completeness and accuracy of the register. I will be delighted to share that work with the hon. Gentleman when it is published and to have a separate meeting to talk him through the Government’s plans.

As part of my tour, I visited the British Chinese Project in Nottingham, and I attended a round table with electoral service managers in Gedling. The hon. Gentleman is fortunate to have passionate electoral service managers in his local area who do good work. I learned a lot from my conversations with them, which I hope will be reflected in the strategy.

On the annual canvass, again, we do not disagree in principle. The annual canvass is a 20th century process—an analogue system in a digital age. We have already seen the modernisation of IER and the register to vote website, but the annual canvass process is in the past and it needs to catch up. It is a significant cost for local authorities, of between £60 million and £65 million. I am determined to try to enable permanent change to reform that system, but what does permanent change look like?

I am determined that we make measured and evaluated changes to the annual canvass that do not risk upsetting the existing system, so that when it comes to preserving the completeness and accuracy of the registers, we do not move simply from one system to another. That is why we established a pilot process. We had three pilot areas in 2016 and we have 24 across the UK in 2017. All the pilots are being evaluated by the Electoral Commission and that evaluation has to be published by the end of 2018, I think. I am determined that we go forward with permanent change to the annual canvass. The pilots so far have tried to give local authorities greater flexibility over the canvassing process.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the endless number of letters that can go back and forth, the paper that is wasted in that communication process and the canvass itself, which can cost £1 for every door knocked on. Legislation may require people to return to a particular address, on occasion up to nine times. Although the canvass procedures are in primary legislation and we are looking to make changes to that, we will shortly lay a statutory instrument that will aim to make further improvements to the registration process within the existing canvass, and which will be debated early next January. The hon. Gentleman might want to speak to Labour Whips or the Committee of Selection because we would be delighted to have him on the Committee to continue these discussions.

The statutory instrument will aim to make further improvements to the registration process by streamlining the deletions process and rationalising correspondence that electors receive in the registration process. The same statutory instrument will also seek to improve the anonymous registration system to ensure that it is accessible to those escaping domestic abuse who need to register in such a way.

The hon. Lady mentioned vulnerable groups; one of the vulnerable groups that I have been determined to help, particularly in view of next year’s 100th anniversary of women getting the right to vote, is those women who are survivors of domestic violence and who might be residing in refuges, who are unable to register to vote without risking their identity being revealed. They have to sign up to an anonymous registration system by going to either a director of social services or a chief constable of police. We will lower that attestation process to domestic refuge managers. There are 12,000 women in domestic violence refuges, but only about 2,300 women use the anonymous registration scheme. I hope that for the May elections we can demonstrate that change and give those women back their voice in the democratic process.

I passionately believe that voting is more than just a cross on a ballot paper. Voting is the end point: there is a process by which we need to re-engage communities, but there are some people who might not want to engage in the electoral registration process to begin with. How do we work with organisations such as the British Chinese Project, which I mentioned and which sees the low levels of literacy among first generation Chinese people, for instance? How do we engage people to make them understand that that registration process and having their say are equally important and vital for them to take part in our democracy?

I am determined to look at that, through reflecting on the democratic society. There are civil society organisations and groups that do a fantastic job helping to register vulnerable people. One of my first visits was to Birmingham, where I met Uprising—a charity that went around with tablets to help people to register to vote.

What can we do as a Government to try to engage those groups with the wider community and to try to provide them with opportunities? I have announced the first National Democracy Week, which will take place next year on the 90th anniversary of the Equal Franchise Act. When we think about our democracy, we think of Magna Carta and parliamentary sovereignty, and think of ours as being one of the oldest democracies in the world, but it is remarkable that it has been just 90 years since women got the equal right to vote.

In celebration of that moment, I want to set out a week’s programme, and the hon. Gentleman will be more than welcome to involve the people of Nottingham. I want to make sure that events take place across the country. How can we ensure that we look at the state of our democracy 90 years on from the Equal Franchise Act and what can we do over the next 10 years, to 2028, to ensure that we have as complete and accurate a register as possible?

There are other events taking place next year, including the suffrage celebrations, with £5 million set out for that. A key part of it will be investment in education and democratic participation. The week before last, I met the National Citizen Service to look at engagement models for young people.

I want to reassure the hon. Gentleman that although we differ on the point of principle, it is a point of principle. I understand that hon. Members feel passionately
about automatic electoral registration. I believe that individual electoral registration is here to stay, but in that context we are determined to ensure that we register as many people as possible. This is a social justice issue and we will publish our democratic engagement plan shortly.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.
recognised? They are not entitled to state education or healthcare, and many cannot even access employment. We need to address that.

**Dr Blackman-Woods:** My hon. Friend makes a really good point. I was coming to the lack of citizenship that underpins most of the problems that the Rohingya people face. They have suffered persecution in Myanmar for decades. The 1982 citizenship law denies them citizenship. They are deprived of the right to vote and unable to access higher education or travel freely. Their lack of official citizenship, which is underpinned by ethnic conflict, is at the root of all those problems. Even before this year, 212,000 Rohingyas had fled Myanmar for Bangladesh, but the latest wave of forced displacement is one of the largest population movements in living memory. More than 640,000 people fled Myanmar in the wake of the August attacks, and the camps are now estimated to be home to more than 836,000 Rohingyas.

**Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab): I strongly agree with my hon. Friend. Does she agree that a basic step towards resolving the terrible tragedy that she describes would be the repeal of the 1982 citizenship law?

**Dr Blackman-Woods:** My right hon. Friend makes a really important point. I will ask the Minister how we can apply international pressure, particularly on the military in Myanmar, to ensure that that is achieved.

The horrific violence over the summer in Rakhine state, in which more than 1,000 Rohingyas Muslims were killed by the Burmese security forces and other militia groups, was described by the UN as “a textbook example of ethnic cleansing.”

Reading reports of mass executions, gang rapes, the burning of villages and the killing of children is harrowing, but it does not compare with hearing first-hand reports of violence from people in the camps. As if that violence were not enough, the Rohingya face horrific journeys when fleeing from Myanmar to Bangladesh. They must trek for days through the countryside in Rakhine state to reach the border crossing, which has been planted with landmines. Some have paid fishermen to take them across the Naf river in fishing boats, but many have drowned trying to make it across.

Despite the deal signed on 23 November between Myanmar and Bangladesh to return the Rohingya to Myanmar, there is understandably widespread aversion among the displaced Rohingya to returning to their home state at present.

**Rushanara Ali** (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that the supposed agreement between the Bangladeshi and the Burmese about return is deeply problematic, given the state of camps in Rakhine and the way the Rohingyas are being treated? I visited Burma twice. Our Government need to ensure that security arrangements are in place and that the Rohingyas’ protection is guaranteed before any such process takes place.

**Dr Blackman-Woods:** My hon. Friend makes an extremely pertinent point.

**Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way—she is being very generous with her time—and thank her for raising this topic. The repatriation deal requires that refugees produce a load of documentation, including names of family members, previous addresses, birth dates and a statement of voluntary return. Does she agree that, given the systematic denial of citizenship rights, that will be incredibly difficult for them?

**Dr Blackman-Woods:** I absolutely agree.

Human Rights Watch has provided evidence of at least 288 villages in northern Rakhine state being partly or completely burned since 25 August. The International Rescue Committee described the deal as “at best, premature,” noting that Rohingya refugees are still fleeing Rakhine state and arriving in Bangladesh. The IRC describes ongoing violent clearance of villages and mining of the border by the Myanmar military; and states that “it is clear that the conditions for safe, voluntary and informed returns are not being met.”

The IRC also states that 81% of the Rohingyas it interviewed do not wish to return to Myanmar at present.

The UK Government and our representatives in the international community must do all they can to press all sides to ensure the safety, livelihoods and, crucially, citizenship rights of the Rohingya if they return. The Burmese Government also need to address the widespread and credible reports of horrific human rights violations in Myanmar, and to stop anti-Rohingya propaganda, which has spread across the country.

Amid the tragedy, the response by the Department for International Development and British NGOs in the camps should be commended. I am pleased that the UK has committed £47 million to meet urgent humanitarian needs in the camps, including £5 million to match the generous donations of the UK public to the Disasters Emergency Committee. The UK is the largest bilateral donor to the crisis and has given more than one third of the overall money donated by the international community. In addition, our existing work in the region means that, when the crisis hit, we were already in a position to provide lifesaving support. Without DFID’s existing networks, that aid would have taken longer to reach those in need.

British NGOs, including Oxfam, ActionAid, the Red Cross and Save the Children, are also doing an incredible job, alongside others, in very difficult conditions. Oxfam alone has reached more than 185,000 people, providing clean drinking water and sanitation facilities. I could give many examples of the amazing work being done by our NGOs in the camps, including setting up emergency health units and providing clothing and emergency kits for people arriving at the camp. We should also pay tribute to the international organisations such as UNHCR, the International Rescue Committee and Médecins sans Frontières, which have been vital in providing frontline support in the camps and have already saved thousands of lives.

The British public, too, have played a remarkable role with their donations. UK aid has provided emergency food for 174,000 people and lifesaving nutritional support to more than 60,000 children under five.

**Catherine West** (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that a great deal of that aid needs to be directed in particular toward women and children suffering violence?
Dr Blackman-Woods: Absolutely. My hon. Friend makes an important point, which I will come to in a minute.

UK aid has provided safe drinking water and latrines to 138,000 people. It has also provided counselling and psychological support for over 10,000 women suffering from the traumas of war and sexual violence. I witnessed that service myself in the transit camps, where newly arrived refugees, traumatised by their experiences, have their medical and personal needs assessed before moving to the camp. That showed the difference international efforts are making on the ground, particularly the support being given to women and children. It was also heartening to see the generosity of so many of the ordinary people of Bangladesh, who though poor themselves have given a lot to the refugees and welcomed them into their country. Nevertheless, the UNHCR has estimated that there is a shortfall of £247 million in the funding needed from the international community to meet the needs in the camps.

Turning to the response from the international community, while Britain and France initially put forward a Security Council resolution on Myanmar in late October, China and Russia refused to co-operate, meaning that it is now only a statement passed by the Security Council and does not carry the weight of a resolution. The statement said that the Security Council “strongly condemns the widespread violence that has taken place in Rakhine State, Myanmar,” and “further expresses grave concern over reports of human rights violations and abuses in Rakhine State, including by the Myanmar security forces”.

It has therefore been up to individual Governments to take action to try to resolve the crisis. As a number of hon. Members in this room will know, much more work needs to be done to come to an international solution. Many critics noted with surprise that the Rohingya crisis was barely mentioned at the most recent summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, which took place earlier in November. The UK and EU should be using our relationship with ASEAN to push it to make the crisis a higher priority for the whole region.

What should the UK Government’s priorities be? The UK Government must do all they can to ensure that any deal reached between Myanmar and Bangladesh to return the refugees ensures that return is safe, voluntary and informed. For as long as the Rohingyas are living in the camps, the UK and international community must have four urgent priorities. First, international aid is essential in ensuring that the Rohingyas’ basic needs are met and that camp life can improve. The donors’ meeting in February, where more aid is being requested, will be critical in that respect. Secondly, the camps need more space, so it is urgent that Bangladesh determines as soon as possible how that can be achieved. Thirdly, staff and volunteers from UNHCR and NGOs are doing an amazing job servicing the camps and supporting the Rohingyas. They do not seek recognition for their efforts, but their brilliant work in difficult circumstances should be acknowledged.

Fourthly, the underlying problem of the Rohingya is not only the violence and persecution they face in Myanmar, but their lack of citizenship. I will never forget the young man, aged 25, who we met at our first meeting at the camp. He had been born at the camp, as his parents had fled Myanmar in an earlier displacement. Despite facing huge challenges with regard to shelter and food, he told us the most important thing he wanted was citizenship, because then he could make his own way in the world. At present, that will not be easily achieved. The military in Myanmar have refused citizenship, and Bangladesh is reluctant to give permanent residency to so many people in a very poor area of a low-income country.

International pressure to solve the crisis is of the utmost urgency, and I would like to hear from the Minister what the Government are going to do to try to step up the amount of aid delivered not only by the UK Government but by other partners, and how they will press for a longer-term international solution to the problem.

Several hon. Members rose—

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Order. I will call Mr Philip Hollobone to speak next, but there is obviously considerable interest in the debate. As a result, in order to give sufficient time to the Front-Bench spokespersons of the Labour and Scottish National parties and the Government, I am cutting the time immediately to three minutes per speech.

2.47 pm

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your distinguished chairmanship, Mr Paisley, and a huge pleasure to congratulate the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) on her excellent speech. I had the privilege of going on the same CPA visit to see the Rohingyas as the hon. Lady, and it seemed to me that two responses were required from Her Majesty’s Government, who are so ably represented here by my right hon. Friend the Minister.

The first is the diplomatic response to the grossest example of ethnic cleansing that one could come up with. It is ethnic cleansing, pure and simple, and must be 100% condemned through all diplomatic channels available to us. I appreciate the sensitivities of the nascent democracy in Burma, but we must make it clear that the generals are responsible for this ethnic cleansing and that the international community will not put up with it. When it comes to the potential return of Rohingya refugees, returning stateless people to remain stateless in their country of origin is not good enough. These people require their nationhood to be given to them.

The second response required from Her Majesty’s Government is humanitarian assistance. Britain has a good record of providing financial assistance directly to the camps, but more will obviously be required. We must stimulate further contributions from other countries, particularly Muslim countries, because we are dealing with a Muslim population and there are lots of rich Muslim countries in the world that, frankly, should be stepping up to the plate rather more.

On the CPA visit to the refugee camp, we had the privilege of meeting some truly inspirational aid workers from the UNHCR and the International Rescue Committee. It was a privilege to meet them and see the fantastic work that they do.

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): Reflecting on what my hon. Friend just said, it would be very dangerous for this to be seen as only a Muslim
issue. It is a global humanitarian catastrophe, and while I accept what he says—that we want to see all nations contributing—to try to frame it in an ethnic way would be the wrong way forward.

Mr Hollobone: The point I am making is absolutely right: yes, it is an international emergency, but the Rohingya are being expelled because they are Muslim. We must not ignore that fact. We also have to accept that there are very rich Muslim nations in the world that can step up to the plate. I do not think that the Minister and I disagree; help is great, wherever it comes from.

The international aid workers we met, many of whom have been international aid workers for a long time, told us that the Kutupalong camp, which we visited and which had more than 400,000 people in it, is the most congested refugee camp they have ever experienced. That is a huge problem because, as was certainly made clear to us, the outbreak of disease is a really big concern. When we asked what the solution is, they said they will simply have to create more, smaller camps in that part of Bangladesh, which will minimise the risk of a disease outbreak. If we can encourage the Bangladeshi Government to do that—they have been very generous—that would be good.

The aid workers made the point that we need to think about the medium term. There has been a rush of refugees into Bangladesh, but those people will not go back in a hurry and they will not go back in numbers, so we need to think five or 10 years ahead. The aid workers also told us that in absolutely no way should those people be returned to any unsafe situation, and that there must be an informed, safe, voluntary, dignified and sustainable return, or no return at all.

The Bangladeshis need to speed up the entry clearance process for refugee aid workers. Some of the pre-registration processes for refugee organisations are, frankly, taking too long: they can take six to 12 months. I am sure the Minister is on the case and will listen carefully to the debate.

2.52 pm

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): The UK has a proud history of being courageous, compassionate and generous, and of leading the way on humanitarian rights in the international community. I am here to say that we must act to protect the Rohingya people.

Last week, I returned from the camps, where I was not just visiting but working as a doctor. I visited all the camps on the Myanmar-Bangladesh border and also went to the checkpoints. I promised the people I met that I would tell their stories. People had to choose between returning to the fires and picking their three children who were burning alive, or picking the two children who were still alive and running with a shirt over their back, making the treacherous journey over the border into Bangladesh. I held those charred babies in my arms and made a promise to tell their story.

I say on the record, as I have all week, that this is not ethnic cleansing. Ethnic cleansing is not a crime in humanitarian law. This is genocide—the systematic dehumanisation of a population of people—and we have to call it out. We are proud to be British and all that stands for. Our standing in the world is to be applauded. The amount we give to humanitarian efforts is absolutely wonderful, but it is tantamount to putting a sticking plaster on a gunshot wound and allowing the shooter to roam free. We cannot be bystanders to this genocide.

I met an imam who managed to escape into the bushes as the military arrived in his village and started shooting everybody. He described, through his tears, all the men being mutilated and killed as their wives were forced to watch; women being dragged backwards by their hair and gang raped repeatedly as their children were forced to watch; and their children, as they ran away screaming, being dragged back and thrown into the fires. I know that that is hard to hear, but I promised I would tell their stories.

We cannot be bystanders to a genocide in which a group of people really believe that throwing living babies into fire is just. What does that say about what we will allow to happen in our world? What does it say about the world that we are raising our families in? I met a four-year-old girl—the same age as my eldest daughter—who was absolutely mute because of the injuries she had sustained and the journey she had made, without her parents, into Bangladesh. She was able to say only, “They killed them all,” before being unable to speak again.

We are a full member of the UN Security Council, we have leverage and we can make changes. We cannot stand by and let this happen. I am calling for an independent ministerial delegation to go to Myanmar, into the Rakhine province, and to call this what it is.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan: Question

Mr Hollobone: The point I am making is absolutely right: yes, it is an international emergency, but the Rohingya are being expelled because they are Muslim. We must not ignore that fact. We also have to accept that there are very rich Muslim nations in the world that can step up to the plate. I do not think that the Minister and I disagree; help is great, wherever it comes from.

The international aid workers we met, many of whom have been international aid workers for a long time, told us that the Kutupalong camp, which we visited and which had more than 400,000 people in it, is the most congested refugee camp they have ever experienced. That is a huge problem because, as was certainly made clear to us, the outbreak of disease is a really big concern. When we asked what the solution is, they said they will simply have to create more, smaller camps in that part of Bangladesh, which will minimise the risk of a disease outbreak. If we can encourage the Bangladeshi Government to do that—they have been very generous—that would be good.

The aid workers made the point that we need to think about the medium term. There has been a rush of refugees into Bangladesh, but those people will not go back in a hurry and they will not go back in numbers, so we need to think five or 10 years ahead. The aid workers also told us that in absolutely no way should those people be returned to any unsafe situation, and that there must be an informed, safe, voluntary, dignified and sustainable return, or no return at all.

The Bangladeshis need to speed up the entry clearance process for refugee aid workers. Some of the pre-registration processes for refugee organisations are, frankly, taking too long: they can take six to 12 months. I am sure the Minister is on the case and will listen carefully to the debate.

2.55 pm

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): It is a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan). I, too, visited the camps, and like her I made that promise. It still feels as raw today as when I went there.

I will make a few points in the short time I have. I agree with the Minister that this is not only a Muslim problem: we were told of Hindus who had been expelled because they are Rohingya. The very fact that the Pope may have been advised—I would not wish to give His Holiness advice—not to use the word “Rohingya” is very wrong. All of us should be free to describe the Rohingya for who they are and what they are. Apparently, a delegation from Burma came over a year or so back at the invitation of the Bangladeshi Government. They went into the camps and said they did not see any Rohingya, only Bangladeshis. That is the problem.

If the Myanmar Government deny people who they are, sending them back there will make no difference. There is a cultural problem here—tacit agreement with the process that has happened. The local people in Myanmar are “not unhappy” that these people have been driven out in the most horrific manner. That needs to be addressed. Otherwise, sending the Rohingya back will only send them back into a scenario in which they are permanently under threat, despised and robbed of their rights. I put it very clearly on the record that we must not accept any pressure to not use the terminology of their race. They are Rohingya and should be respected as such, and the fundamental flaw in this is that Myanmar does not recognise that.

I accept what my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) said about permits, and I, too, am concerned that valuable groups such as Islamic Relief
UK and Restless Beings want to work in the camps but cannot get access. If this is a legitimate aid process, as much as help as possible should be accepted.

I am also concerned about the estimated 285,000 people outside the camps. The camps are one part of the problem, but there are also huge numbers of people lost in the system. I respect the hon. Member for Tooting saying that this is genocide. I am not sure whether it meets the criteria for that—it looked that way to me—but it is certainly at least ethnic cleansing, and we must not pussyfoot around calling it what it is.

When we talk only about numbers of people and moving them around, we are denying those people their identity and their human rights. Therefore, to me, if nothing else comes out of the debate, we must at least put Myanmar, its Government and its military on notice that we have to do something. Please listen.

All we are asking is for this to be recognised as what it is: the dehumanisation of people going to Bangladesh. Bangladesh is a very poor country—what are we expecting it to do? It cannot cope with what is happening. We have been told that by December, which is only a couple of days away, 1 million people from Myanmar will be on its borders. We have to do something. I am here to support my colleagues across parties in saying to the Minister that we have to do something. Please listen.

By coincidence, my researcher worked in what was then Burma, long before the new golden leadership, when the generals were in charge. There is nothing new about what has been going on there. Colleagues who went to the camps saw people born there not 10 years ago or 15 years ago, but in excess of 25 years ago. It is a crying shame that the camps are still in that condition. The longevity of the camps is very important. I had the honour and privilege of visiting our troops in South Sudan—another place in the world where we should all be ashamed of what is going on—and the camps there had fresh water, sanitation and some longevity, so that when the rains came, the people there were protected.

At the same time, we need to think of the people of Bangladesh. These camps are on the side of the river, on some of the most fertile land that these people, who are subsistence farmers, have. Their land has been taken away from them for generations now, and more will be taken away. The right sort of compensation needs to be directed to them, through either our aid budget or the international community.

Sir Mike Penning: I will not, because I want everybody to be able to speak. That is very important.

I am very worried that we might be encouraging people to go back to Myanmar with the so-called deal between Bangladesh and the Myanmar Government. People are being asked up to give up really quite personal details that could be easily used against them when they return to this place—I am conscious of not talking about a country, because it is not a country. These people have no rights. It is illegal under international law to make someone have no citizenship at all, yet that is exactly what has happened there for generation after generation.

My view, which may be different from colleagues’ views, is that we must not be part of any deal that encourages people to go back to watch their daughters being raped—they are not of my daughters’ age, of 26 or 27; girls of 11, 10 or younger are being raped—and their sons castrated in front of them. That is what is going on. That is the sort of thing that, if we are not careful, we will condone.

There is no change in the country. The generals are still in control, and they feel they can do this to these people because nothing will happen to them. We must make sure that something does happen to them and that they go to the international court in The Hague, so that we protect these people.

If we stop to contemplate those atrocities even for a moment, we can be in no doubt that what has taken place is ethnic cleansing and genocide. The US and the UN have both said that. The British Government are yet to recognise it. I have said it before and I will say it again: 640,000 people have been deliberately driven...
from their homes, with many killed or tortured. I fear that the international community is failing these people, who are stateless within their own country and do not have the necessary level of aid and support as refugees.

The thing I want to focus on and that I am deeply concerned about, like my colleagues, is the Rohingya refugees’ potential return to Myanmar. A proposed return without secured political and human rights may create a perception of progress while in reality abandoning the Rohingya people to a life of normalised terror. With the current situation and the animosity, this is no time to be talking about simply returning the Rohingyas to Myanmar. If return is on the table, what exactly are they returning to? Without rights and acceptance, what difference will it make? How can we expect people to return when they are dehumanised and persecuted daily?

It is far too early to be returning people to uncertainty. Early surveys indicate that only 10% would wish to return at this point anyway. The 1951 UN refugee convention is absolutely clear about the forced return of refugees and the conditions of safe return that would be required. That is an absolute principle within international law, and any forcible repatriation must be rejected by the entire international community.

Last time I spoke on this subject, I pleaded with the Government to look seriously at more targeted sanctions against the Burmese military and to convince the Burmese military—not just the leadership—to accept what is going on and change the status quo. So far, all we have done within Europe and the UN is to stop our military training and deny visas to military personnel. That is simply not enough.

Rushanara Ali: Does my hon. Friend agree that the UK Government should look at the business interests of the Burmese generals who have been prosecuting these acts of violence and terror and sanction them? Will the Minister address that point today?

Naz Shah: I absolutely agree. I said it previously, but it must be reiterated: unless we sanction the military and carry out these investigations, we are not telling the world that we are serious about this issue.

The Myanmar military and leadership need to understand that actions have consequences and repercussions, and that we as an international community will not stand by and allow this to continue. They need to understand that Great Britain and those who have spoken today have been heard and listened to and that these people’s stories are reaching our shores. They are the stories of tears that my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) spoke about, of women who are homeless and of children who will know no certainty for years to come and have no future. They have come out of the chip pan and into the fire, and they are still burning—literally. This is not something we can accept or stand by and watch. We must be doing more.

3.6 pm

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) on securing this important debate on the most serious humanitarian crisis facing the world today.

On visiting the camps with the Conservative Friends of Bangladesh in September, I witnessed some of the most horrific scenes imaginable. I know that several hon. Members across the Chamber have also visited. We saw makeshift camps as far as the eye can see and poor sanitation, and it is mostly women and children there, because husbands have been killed. We saw women facing with their children—many of whose houses had been burned, walking for five days with just the clothes on their back, clutching their children. In every case, when we spoke to people, it was the Myanmar military that had conducted those atrocities and horrific attacks.

I have to say, I am immensely proud of the role that the United Kingdom has played in terms of aid. We visited the Kutupalong camp and a camp right on the border with Myanmar—so close that we could see the smoke over the border—and were shown images of landmines and heard horrific tales. I was really proud to see the Union flag from the British people and that aid was going there. I think we are the largest bilateral donor, having given some £47 million. I was pleased to see the Secretary of State for International Development there this weekend, committing a further £12 million. I am pleased that we are playing our part, but that is only half of this issue. We have to provide the aid, but the second half is the diplomatic efforts.

I am also proud of what Bangladesh has done. It has a population of 160 million, and Sheikh Hasina has welcomed these people and said, “If we can feed 160 million, we can feed another 500,000 Rohingya.” That is an incredibly noble thing to do, and I applaud the Bangladeshi Government. However, I draw the line at the deal with Myanmar, because I have serious concerns about sending people back to a state—Rakhine state—in which they are not welcome, are persecuted and will have all sorts of untold violence inflicted upon them.

Mrs Main: On our visit, we saw people with nothing, as I am sure other hon. Members did. There is no way they would have the documentation necessary. Even if there were some sort of rules about documentation, the majority of people will not fulfil those criteria.

Will Quince: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Stateless people will not have rights or protections, which is a serious concern. All the refugees we spoke to in the camps said they wanted to go back to Rakhine province, but only when it was safe and their security was guaranteed. Before we talk about, endorse, sanction or support any deals between the Myanmar Government and Bangladesh, it is important that security and protection is guaranteed and that we see the humanitarian charities and NGOs in there to protect those people’s rights.

Several hon. Members have talked about what the UK is doing. I am proud of what the Minister has done so far. There is always more that we can do, but we need to talk about tangible measures that the British Government can take. As we know, measures at the UN have been blocked by both China and Russia. China is key. I met the Foreign Secretary only last week. We have to put pressure on China, which has a border with Myanmar, because it also has concerns about humanitarian crises in Myanmar spreading and refugees potentially entering into China. We have to stress the point that China is key, and diplomatic efforts should be directed that way.

I am conscious of the time, so I will conclude. I know the Minister is as passionate about solving the issue as the rest of us. I implore him to do as much as he can to help to resolve it.
3.11 pm

**Jo Stevens** (Cardiff Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince), and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) for securing this important debate. It is good to see so many colleagues here, particularly from the CPA delegation, of which I was a member a couple of weeks ago. I have a substantial British Bangladeshi diaspora in my constituency. As the Rohingya crisis has developed at such speed and at such scale during the past couple of months, I have received lots of representations and a lot of concern has been expressed about what was going on, so I felt privileged to take part in the delegation to go and see for myself what was happening. I wanted to understand the nature of the crisis and also the role that the Bangladeshi Government and their people have played in the humanitarian effort, but most importantly what I, we and the Government can and should do in terms of humanitarian support and political international solutions.

I want to reiterate the praise that we have heard today for the Bangladeshi Government, for the Bangladeshi host families in Cox’s Bazar, the NGOs and the generous fund-raising efforts of the British public. On that last point, I want to mention my local councillor, Ali Ahmed and the Bangladesh Association Cardiff, who so far have raised £50,000 for the international relief effort.

What I saw and what I heard directly at the Kutupalong camp will stay with me for a very long time. I saw a mass of humanity, literally as far as the horizon, and that was not the entire camp; it was only a small proportion. There was no space, no water and no sanitation. People were picking up shelter packs. I do not know where they were going to walk to so as to erect these pieces of tarpaulin and bamboo shoots to make some sort of shelter. There was literally no space. As we approach the cyclone season, I really worry that if a cyclone hits that camp, we will see the destruction and death of hundreds of thousands of people.

I have three questions for the Minister. I want to thank him for a frank discussion at the all-party group on Bangladesh last week. I know he visited Myanmar last week. What representations were made and to whom? Can he tell us a little more about the response that he got? What can he tell us about the agreement between Burma and Bangladesh on the return of the Rohingya to Burma, which disturbs me and obviously several other Members greatly? Finally, to take up the point made by the hon. Member for Colchester about China, what diplomatic efforts are being made with the Chinese, who clearly have significant leverage to make the Burmese regime deal with the situation in some way? So far they have done nothing and have been complicit in what I agree has been genocide.

3.14 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) on securing this debate and giving us all a chance to participate. I declare an interest as the chairman of the all-party group on freedom of religious belief, which speaks out for the right of everybody to hold their own religion and belief and to practise that. The case of the Rohingyas is one that I have spoken on numerous times in this place. Indeed, the last time we had a debate here in Westminster Hall, I spoke on them specifically, along with others. Like others, I am not afraid to stand and speak up. I do what I can to raise awareness and possibly help to bring about a change in the horrendous situation.

On Thursday 23 November, Myanmar and Bangladesh signed an agreement to repatriate the Rohingya refugees. Ever mindful that the monsoon season is on the way, the Bangladeshi Foreign Affairs Ministry stated that a joint working group would be set up within these three weeks to manage the process, and the return of the refugees would start within two months. Human rights groups have raised several concerns about the agreement, and I must agree with their concerns. The first is that the military generals could still obstruct the process, and it is unclear where the Rohingyas will be resettled, given that many villages have been razed.

Let us be clear about the scale of the crisis: 624,000 Rohingya refugees have arrived in Bangladesh since the Burmese military launched its ethnic cleansing and its genocidal, brutal, bloody, murder of innocents. The sheer volume of refugees indicates that fleeing statements cannot be made with no plan in place. These people need assurances that they can return home—indeed, that there is a place for them to return to. They need to know that they are back for good and welcome for good, and that they need not be concerned about having to uproot their lives and their children in the near future. Without a guarantee of citizenship, the Rohingyas will be vulnerable to the same discrimination and violence that they have experienced for decades. That is not acceptable. They need their guarantee of citizenship.

China has indicated a wish to try to do something. There may be some light at the end of the tunnel, but there is not enough light to make the path home safe, and more needs to be done. I thank the Minister for all the hard work that he does. I know he is very compassionate and has a personal interest in this matter. I look to him to provide an update of what steps we are taking to help this nation of people who are so desperately in need of international aid and support. We must do something right now.

3.16 pm

**Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) for securing this important debate and for bringing our attention to her visit to the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh. If we watch the TV and follow these stories, it is bad enough. My hon. Friend should be thanked for her efforts in bringing the reality that she has experienced at first hand to this House.

The UN refugee agency said that what it is doing was possibly help to bring about a change in the horrendous situation. The Prime Minister has called the Rohingya crisis heartbreaking and has pledged to deepen partnerships with Asian countries in a move to combat such problems. The Foreign Secretary is looking for more analysis. There may be some light at the end of the tunnel, but there is not enough light to make the path home safe, and more needs to be done. I thank the Minister for all the hard work that he does. I know he is very compassionate and has a personal interest in this matter. I look to him to provide an update of what steps we are taking to help this nation of people who are so desperately in need of international aid and support. We must do something right now.
The UK is well placed to influence stakeholders in Myanmar and across the region, and at the United Nations. Last week, Burma and Bangladesh signed an agreement to repatriate refugees, although Burma have no details of how many would be allowed to return home. Repatriations are expected to begin in the next month or two, but the Myanmar Government’s continued denial of a well-evidenced campaign of ethnic cleansing is astonishing.

Can we really believe that the Rohingya’s home, or what is left of it, is safe to return to? Repatriations must not happen prematurely and without assurances that there is a genuine solution in place. I ask the Government to do everything in their power to bring about lasting peace and to ensure that no Rohingya will be returned to a place where they will not be safe. It should be recognised that the people of Bangladesh have opened their borders and their hearts to people in desperate need. If Bangladesh is to deliver a progressive refugee policy under such strain, the international community must step up its support. It is right that we continue to talk about the atrocities, but we also need to see proper recognition of the scale of the issue from the international community, and we need action to stop the horror.

3.19 pm

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) on securing this timely debate and bringing further attention to such an important issue. I also echo many of the comments that have been made in the debate today. It is utterly heartbreaking to read and hear reports about the devastation in Rakhine state and of the desperate situation that many are facing in Bangladesh. We have a responsibility to speak out against those atrocities and do all we can to stop them, and having listened to colleagues from across the House speak in this debate today, it is clear that that is something on which we all agree.

More than half a million Rohingya have fled to Bangladesh since August, and more than 340,000 of those are children, many travelling unaccompanied. That is the largest displacement of people in a short period since the Rwandan genocide. Two hundred and eighty-four Rohingya villages have been torched; tens of thousands of people have been victims of gender-based violence, including rape and sexual assault; thousands more people have been violently attacked, and many of those have tragically lost their lives. We must be prepared to call this what it is: a textbook example of ethnic cleansing.

I commend the steps that the Government have taken so far in an effort to tackle this crisis. Unfortunately, however, as we all know, in reality that action is not enough. We have been speaking for long enough, and the situation continues to worsen. I call on the Government to lead the way in organising an immediate co-ordinated and effective international response to the crisis, and to urge the other members of the United Nations Security Council to come together and use their collective power to help this persecuted minority. The Burmese Government must be held to account, and the war crimes that have been committed by the Burmese military must be investigated in an international court. The Rohingya people need justice.

3.22 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) on securing this important debate. Many of my constituents have been, and remain, extremely concerned about the situation in Rakhine state. It was the subject of the first wide-scale correspondence campaign that I received as a Member of Parliament, and it remains one of the biggest. Like me, my constituents were appalled about the extreme violence inflicted on the Rohingya in Rakhine state, which has been going on for years.

It is difficult to imagine the scale of the exodus: more than 600,000 people have crossed into Bangladesh since the end of August. No wonder UN officials described the situation as a “textbook example” of ethnic cleansing. Will the Minister confirm whether our Government have officially classified the situation as such? More to the point, has it been classified as a genocide? That is what I feel it actually is.

Mark Field: Yes, we have made it clear that it is ethnic cleansing. The question of whether it is genocide is a legal issue and not something that Governments can decide. There has to be a legal process through the international community. The ethnic cleansing point has been made—I have made it on the Floor of the House, and my right hon. Friends the Foreign Secretary and the Secretary of State for International Development have also made it very clear that this seems like a case of ethnic cleansing.

Mr Dhesi: I thank the Minister for his response, but he will be the first to acknowledge that that does not mean that these events have been classified as a crime against humanity. Hopefully we will pursue the Myanmar Government on that.

It is to the credit of Bangladesh and other nations that they have attempted to accommodate and assist the Rohingya refugees. While a repatriation agreement has been made, help and resources to deal with the humanitarian crisis are still urgently needed. The International Organisation for Migration estimates that more than 820,000 Rohingya need urgent support to survive—food, water and medicine. The UN and international aid agencies must be allowed to reach displaced families, and the Foreign Office must maintain pressure on the Burmese authorities to ensure that humanitarian aid gets to Rohingya communities.

This is a human rights crisis as well as a humanitarian crisis, and concerns about rising levels of intolerance in Myanmar remain. I spoke previously in Parliament about the enormous respect that was accorded to the de facto leader of Myanmar, Aung San Suu Kyi, by this country during her own struggle for democracy—she of all people should respect the rights of all, especially minorities. It is therefore understandable that human rights groups remain concerned over the repatriation agreement signed last week. Because the Rohingyas are not regarded as Burmese citizens by the military, there remains a distinct and serious concern that the generals could still obstruct the repatriation. Kofi Annan’s Rakhine commission recommended that the Rohingya be granted citizenship and freedom of movement. Mr Annan stated:
There is no serious police service there. The dangers of in adequate—pitiful—given the scale of the problem. The horrors are there. This country deserves it is all refugee camps. All that many of the refugees solve this enormous series of tragedies. Without citizenship, the Rohingya may still be vulnerable to the discrimination and violence that has been ongoing for decades.

I hope that our Government will take a global lead in finding long-term solutions to achieve lasting peace once violence has ceased and humanitarian access has been put in place, and that they will work with the authorities on the implementation of Kofi Annan's Rakhine commission recommendations. Before I sit down, let me record the enormous gratitude and respect that I and no doubt all hon. Members feel towards the aid workers and organisations, including the superb humanitarian charity, Khalsa Aid, whose founder, Ravi Singh, lives in my constituency. We are in their debt as they undertake such efforts in circumstances that we can hardly imagine.

There is a feeling of desperation and impotence when we see the scale of this problem—when we look, human beings, at a young child carrying an even younger child who is hopelessly paralysed, and when we imagine the depth of suffering of people who have gone through the worst experiences that life has to offer. We cannot see ourselves as having any facile solution to this issue; it is not easy. There is no future in Bangladesh for a million people. We cannot allow the camp to continue, let alone grow, yet that is one of the alternatives. Another alternative—all alternatives are unpalatable—is for people to return to Myanmar. Can that be done? I believe that we should not dismiss it, but we have seen in the eyes of people in the refugee camp their fear about going back. Who could not understand that?

I believe we have a record with our services of brilliant work in creating, defending and protecting peace. That work has been going on for decades. If people do go back, and that is the only practical solution to this crisis, we must guarantee support and be generous enough to provide resources in great quantities, so as to solve this enormous series of tragedies.

What sticks in the mind is not just the individuals, but standing on a high point in the camp and looking out over hills into the distance, and as far as the eye can see, it is all refugee camps. All that many of the refugees have is a piece of tarpaulin and a stick to protect themselves. The horrors are there. This country deserves great credit for the aid that we have given, but despite all the heroic, herculean tasks that we have performed, it is inadequate—pitiful—given the scale of the problem. There is not enough food. The water is contaminated. There is no serious police service there. The dangers of fire and of disease breaking out are ever present.

Although the status quo is intolerable and offends humanity, we must look with intelligence and care towards practical solutions. I am afraid that means considering the return of the Rohingya, if they wish to return and if we can provide adequate protection for them—

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Order. I must call the first Opposition spokesperson, Hannah Bardell.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. Please excuse my voice; the cold has reached Livingston, but I will do my best to get through my speech and be heard.

I congratulate the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) on securing the debate and on a really powerful speech. We were able to hear from all those in the Chamber who have visited Myanmar and seen at first hand the tragedy that is unfolding. It struck me during the hon. Lady's speech that some of the things being denied to the Rohingya people—food, education, sanitation, water and citizenship—are the very basic needs of human beings, and that we should be and are joining together proudly to stand against what is and appears to be genocide. I appreciate the Minister's point about the legal language in relation to that and the definitions, but I urge him to look for every avenue possible, to use the utmost imagination and every channel available to him and the Government, to stand up to the regime on behalf of the Rohingya people.

Mrs Main: Does the hon. Lady share my concern that His Holiness the Pope made a speech in Burma today, yet still could not bring himself to mention the word “Rohingya”? It is not just our Government but the whole world that needs to do more.

Hannah Bardell: Although the hon. Lady and I are in different parties, I agree with her words and sentiments, because language is very important in these situations. However, although our words and our support are very important, we will be judged on our actions. I think that this place is at its best when we are in agreement, and we are in agreement today across all parties and, indeed, all Governments. The Scottish Government pledged in September £120,000 from their humanitarian emergency fund for the Disasters Emergency Committee appeal for the Rohingya people.

We have seen images of what is unfolding and heard the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) talk about going to the area as a doctor to use her skills to provide support. We are very fortunate that people come to this place with professional skills that they can then use in their role as parliamentarians. I cannot imagine what that is like; I have not been myself, but those who have visited have spoken powerfully about their experiences at first hand. I commend the hon. Lady for the work that she did in her own time to support those who are suffering so terribly.

The hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) spoke about military sanctions and what the Government can do to crack down in that regard. Watching the news recently, we have seen the reporter Alex Crawford, who managed to gain access to a camp. As the world rolls on and Brexit rolls on, some of these stories, some of these
issues, fall away into the background. Sadly, we often see only through the lens of our media what is happening, and it is a huge challenge for them to report on it. Some of the experiences captured in the images—of people’s houses being burned and so on—are some of the worst experiences that human beings can possibly have. It is just devastating, so we must pull together and look at all the options available to us.

The return of people to their state will be hugely challenging, but I ask the Minister what practically we can do when we are talking about timescales of five or 10 years. That seems truly incredible. In a world and in countries of plenty such as ours, can we not find solutions and shorten that time? These are such long timescales for people living in such terribly tragic situations.

I know that there are huge challenges in looking to resettle people, which has been considered. I think that Canada has been looking at resettlement options, but are there avenues for the countries in the United Kingdom to give more support in that regard? I would be very interested to hear from the Minister on that front. I know that many other people wish to speak, and my voice is failing me, but I congratulate all hon. Members who have taken part in the debate, and I again call on the Government to do everything they possibly can to support the Rohingya people.

3.34 pm

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Paisley. I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) on securing this very important and timely debate. I thank her not just for making her speech, but for taking the time to go to Bangladesh to see the situation of the Rohingya people. I also thank, for giving their time and bringing back their testimony, the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone), my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan), the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main), my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Eleanor Smith), the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince) and my hon. Friend the Members for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) and for Newport West (Paul Flynn). Their words have been heard today in the House. I also thank my hon. Friend the Members for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin), for Bradford West (Naz Shah), for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid) and for Slough (Mr Dhesi) for their excellent speeches.

The humanitarian situation, as the Minister knows better than I do, is extremely serious. He will have heard the many terrible stories about sexual violence. We therefore want to know that the Foreign Office is continuing the excellent initiative of the previous Foreign Secretary, William Hague, in deploying the Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict team. I suggest to the Minister that perhaps that needs more resources than it has at the moment.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I am hugely concerned about the unaccompanied children now in the camps. Does the hon. Lady share my concern that those children, living in the dreadful conditions that we have heard about today, are ripe for exploitation by people traffickers? We need to be in there, ensuring that that is not happening.

Helen Goodman: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. The risks to the people in the camps, whether of disease or violence, are very significant. The British people have done a great thing in mobilising a lot of resources, and the Government have responded well to that.

I welcome the acknowledgement by the United Nations and the United States Government that this is a case of ethnic cleansing. I am pleased that the Minister has moved on from saying that it looks like ethnic cleansing to saying that it is ethnic cleansing. Clearly we need to look into the legal situation. That means we must have people going into the camps and to Myanmar to find out about the situation. I am talking about qualified, legal experts from the UN. As many hon. Members have said, on both sides of the Chamber, it is extremely important that the perpetrators of these horrendous crimes are brought to justice, and the first step is securing the evidence. The Myanmar military continue to deny their responsibility and to deny access, and that must be one of the things that we now make a priority.

Everyone in the Chamber recognises the fantastic generosity of the Bangladeshi people. Notwithstanding that, there are clearly a lot of questions about the proposal to repatriate people from Bangladesh to Myanmar. These are people: they are not cattle to be shunted backwards and forwards across the border. We need to make that absolutely clear. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the conditions in northern Rakhine state are not suitable at the moment for “safe and sustainable returns”.

Hon. Members have spoken about the problems of putting together documentation. It is also vital, if this is to be done in the right way, that it is voluntary repatriation and that people are not forced, with the fear of yet more violence, back across the border. Obviously that means that the UN and the international community need to put resources in to facilitate that situation, probably on both sides of the border, because at the moment the situation is clearly not safe.

The fundamental issue, of course, is that the Rohingya people are not equal under the law in Myanmar and their citizenship is not recognised. Like the hon. Member for St Albans, I think it is regrettable that the Pope was advised that he would inflame the situation if he said that these were Rohingya people. It is basic to people’s identity that they determine that identity themselves and everybody else acknowledges it. I am pleased that Ministers have been calling on the Myanmar Government to implement the recommendations of Kofi Annan’s Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, because only those will give us a sustainable solution and secure the legal status of the Rohingya and other minorities in Myanmar, which has the highest number of stateless people anywhere in the world. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) spoke about the importance of changing the 1982 citizenship law. That is obviously a crucial part of building a new, safe situation and returning the law in that country to international norms.

Great Britain has an important role to play here. We have an historic involvement with these countries and we have shown our generosity by giving aid, but we have also been the pen-holder at the United Nations in the diplomacy through which the Government have been trying to secure an international consensus on the need for change. If it helps the Minister, I will say on behalf of Her Majesty’s Opposition that China and Russia
should be supporting the British Government’s diplomatic efforts, because it is clear that the UN cannot move on substantively without their agreement. I think that they need to acknowledge their international responsibilities.

Getting the Myanmar Government to acknowledge the rights of the Rohingya people will require a change to the Myanmar constitution. That means it must go through their Parliament with 75% of the vote. That is only going to happen if they feel that they need to do this. We can help them to understand that they do need to do it. This is where the issue of sanctions comes in. I ask the Minister to consider a few further points on sanctions, in line with the intervention by my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali). Will the Government join the United States in considering targeted sanctions? Will the Government confirm whether it supports a UN-mandated global arms embargo against Myanmar, comprehensive visa restrictions against the military and their families and associates, and, significantly, halting investment in business with companies owned by the Myanmar military?

This is an extremely difficult situation. I know that the Minister is committed to tackling it as well as is possible. He has been in the region twice. I just want to assure him of our support in facilitating a resolution to this crisis, in both the short and the long term.

3.44 pm

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): Thank you, Mr Paisley, for calling me to speak. Having visited Burma last week, for the second time in seven weeks, I welcome the opportunity to update the House on the heartbreakingly appalling situation facing the Rohingya people of Rakhine state and the active work of the UK Government to address it in both Burma and Bangladesh, and in the UN and the international community.

I thank all colleagues for their powerful contributions and testimony, particularly the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods). They should rest assured that their words will be heard not just across the road in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, but around the globe, as we make the case about what is happening. I am well aware that in Burma people actively listen to what is happening in the UK Parliament, so these are words that will be listened to far afield.

Since military operations began in Rakhine state on 25 August, more than 620,000 Rohingya have fled across the border into Bangladesh. Many have given heart-wrenching accounts, which I know many have heard, about the human rights abuses, including unspeakable sexual violence, which has been suffered or witnessed in Rakhine. Up to 1,000 people are still crossing that border each and every day. This is a movement of people on a colossal scale, with few parallels in recent times. I accept the point, made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), that this issue with the Rohingya goes back to the formation of the Burmese state, but the sheer scale of it over the past three months has been remarkable.

I pay tribute again to the Government of Bangladesh for the support they have offered the Rohingya. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s decision to open the border and allow the refugees to enter has without doubt saved countless lives. Last Thursday, as has been pointed out, Bangladesh and Burma signed a memorandum of understanding on the return of refugees to Rakhine. We understand that a joint working group will be set up within three weeks, with the aim of commencing the processing of returns within two months.

I want to touch on the UK Government’s position, because I know that there are concerns across the House. We will press for quick progress on the implementation of this bilateral agreement, but we will be absolutely clear that any returns must be safe, voluntary and dignified, and there must be appropriate international oversight. In my view, which I think is shared by many Members here, it is too early even to talk about voluntary returns at this stage. The Rohingya have rightly addressed legitimate concerns about their personal security. The severe restrictions that Amnesty International has described persist. Access to livelihood and humanitarian aid remains insufficient. That was evident to me from the other side of the border when, on my first visit to Burma, I went to a camp in Sittwe that had been set up in 2012, during one of the more recent times of strife.

It is not a life for the people living in that camp; it is barely a subsistence living. They are able to live and eat, they have healthcare and UK aid is able to provide fairly significantly, but it is not a life that anyone can recognise. It was heartbreakingly sad to chat to Rohingya people there who had had businesses and professions, and who were left in limbo for five years, and potentially for many years to come. That option is not satisfactory.

It would get people across the border, but the notion of setting up similar sorts of camps for the future for many years to come has to be a non-starter.

Mark Field: I am making the point that we want to see people return. I will move on to the important point made by the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) a moment ago. Although the Government are not directly criticising the agreement, our position is that we should be telling both Governments that substantial progress on the ground will be necessary, as well as proper engagement with both ethnic Rakhine and Rohingya—if needed—if any Rohingya are to return.

We want to see the momentum on this issue. The reason for that—I think it was alluded to earlier—is that if the Rohingya do not return, ruthlessly the Burmese military will have got their way; they will have got what they wanted. That is why, although I accept that we should not dream of forcing Rohingya to return, nor should we do this with such swiftness that they are not secure on the ground.

Equally—this is the slight concern I have with the contribution from the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell), who spoke for the Scottish National party—even to talk about resettlement at this stage plays into the hands of the Burmese military, and I think it is something we should avoid. I understand that she is doing it for the best of humanitarian motives, but realistically at the moment we must try to insist that the Rohingya return to their rightful homeland.
Rushanara Ali: Perhaps the Minister will allude to this shortly, but will there be an international presence? Will we be pushing for an independent security presence to protect them, because otherwise we are expecting the perpetrators of ethnic cleansing to be the ones managing this process?

Mark Field: Absolutely. We will. I am also wary of the idea of having a long-term presence there, rather like what has happened in the middle east where one has an unsustainable position for the longer term, but in the short term we need to have an independent international presence to police this matter.

The UK Government have concluded that the inexcusable violence perpetrated on the Rohingya by the Burmese military and ethnic Rakhine militia appears to be ethnic cleansing—or is ethnic cleansing. The UK has been leading the international response diplomatically, politically and in terms of humanitarian support.

Dr Allin-Khan: Will the Minister give way?

Mark Field: If the hon. Lady will excuse me, I am wary that I am running out of time and I want to touch on sanctions and other issues that have been raised.

On 6 November we proposed, and secured with unanimous support, the first UN Security Council presidential statement on Burma in a decade. With this the Security Council made clear its expectations of the Burmese authorities: no further excessive military force; immediate UN humanitarian access; mechanisms to allow voluntary return; and an investigation into human rights violations, including allegations of sexual violence.

Elsewhere in the UN, we are co-sponsoring a UN General Assembly resolution on the human rights situation in Burma. I note the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) about the importance of China in this situation. Please rest assured that a huge amount of work is going on at the UN to try to bring China on board. I think it would be wrong to overstate China’s leverage on these matters, and there are issues on the Chinese-Burmese border that are nothing to do with the Rohingya, but hon. Members are correct that China has an important role to play. The resolution we are proposing has received the support of 135 member states at the Third Committee.

The strong international support for this resolution and the Security Council’s presidential statement send a powerful signal to the Burmese authorities about the military’s conduct and the lasting damage it will do to their international reputation.

May I touch on sanctions, which the hon. Members for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) and for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) mentioned? We impose our sanctions through the EU, but we must secure the consensus of all member states. At the October EU Foreign Affairs Council, the Foreign Secretary secured agreement to consider additional measures if the situation did not improve. Evidently, it has not. If the Burmese authorities do not heed the call of the 6 November UNSC presidential statement, we will be returning to EU partners to press for agreement on further measures, which could include targeted sanctions along the lines that the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow referred to. But we would want to be clear about what impact they were having on the military’s conduct, as indeed would our EU partners. I pledge to the House that we will be giving very serious consideration to trying to work out the appropriateness of such sanctions, including to try to discover whether there is any property or companies owned by the Burmese military.

I attended the Asia-Europe Foreign Ministers meeting in Naypyidaw last Monday and Tuesday and had meetings with the Minister of Defence, Sein Win, the Deputy Foreign Minister, Kyaw Tin, and Aung San Suu Kyi’s chief of staff, Kyaw Tint Swe. My hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) will, I hope, be pleased to learn that I did not pussyfoot about. I referred on each occasion to “Rohingya” and got a lecture for my pains in doing so, but we will continue to do so on that basis.

Dr Allin-Khan: I very much appreciate the Minister giving way. Although I acknowledge that the geopolitics of the region might make it difficult for our Government to speak out against Myanmar, and I appreciate that he was there last week at the same time I was, does he not agree that we stood by and blinked while the Rwandan genocide happened and, given the nature of the crimes against humanity that are currently being committed, while we play around with semantics we risk being bystanders to yet another genocide?

Mark Field: The hon. Lady will be aware that I think of this a great deal. I am very much aware, as we should all be in the international community, that we are faced with a set of problems, and one could argue that they are not dissimilar to what happened in Rwanda, Sri Lanka and Srebrenica, and at various other times. The international community needs to be able to come together, but it needs to do that in a united way, and the only way to do that is through the United Nations, which is why we continue to work tirelessly in that regard.

Any long-term resolution needs to address the issue of citizenship in Burma, as has been said. The report of Kofi Annan’s Advisory Commission on Rakhine State remains central to this, and I welcome Aung San Suu Kyi’s recent establishment of an international advisory board, including Lord Darzi and other respected international political figures, to ensure its implementation. She has publicly committed to implementing the commission’s recommendations, which include reviewing the controversial 1982 citizenship law and making progress on citizenship through the existing legal framework.

The main current impetus continues to be the urgent humanitarian needs of the Rohingya refugees. The UK is the single largest bilateral donor to the crisis. We have now contributed £59 million, as has been stated, and we are making a material difference. We are providing food for over 170,000 people, 140,000 people with safe water and sanitation, and emergency nutritional support to more than 60,000 vulnerable children under the age of five. On 23 October I represented the UK at an UN-organised pledging conference in Geneva, where through our leadership we were able to get more money. But the reality is that, as has been pointed out, that will take us through only to February, when we will need to go through that process again. More will be needed from us and others, and we will sustain the international leadership role on the humanitarian response to ensure that it happens.
I want to touch on sexual violence. I have already mentioned the horrifying accounts provided by some Rohingya refugees about sexual and gender-based violence. Earlier this month the UN’s special representative on sexual violence visited Bangladesh and heard consistent and harrowing reports of the widespread and systematic use of sexual violence against Rohingya women and girls, both in the past on the Burmese side of the border and now in the Bangladeshi camps. That clearly needs to stop. The extremely serious conclusions have meant that the UK Government have deployed two civilian experts to Bangladesh. We will obviously review that and whether to increase it to look at the current levels of investigation and documentation of these abhorrent crimes. They will provide us with advice on where the UK can continue to support this vital work. We are committed to ensuring that there is full support for victims and witnesses of these crimes. We need to have accountability, and we are determined that those who have committed human rights violations will be brought properly to account.

I want to thank everyone here for all that they have said. Please rest assured that my door remains open, as the Minister with responsibility in this area. Please feel free to get in touch at any stage if you are able to pass on either more evidence or the strength of the views of many of your constituents. I know that the hon. Member for City of Durham will want to say a few words, so I will sum up.

The UK Government will do our best to maintain a full range of humanitarian, political and diplomatic efforts, leading the international community’s response to this ongoing catastrophe and pressing Burma to meet urgently the expectations set out in the UN Security Council’s presidential statement. I know that diplomacy has a bad name sometimes, and it is something we have to be very determined to try to work together on. Please be assured that we are doing as much as we can. I wish that we could do more. I wish that this situation could be resolved. I wish that there was more goodwill in that part of the world. The Foreign Office will remain steadfastly determined to ensure, as far as we can, the safe return of the Rohingya people, to ensure access for humanitarian aid and to hold to account those who are responsible for these harrowing crimes.

3.58 pm

Dr Blackman-Woods: I want to start by thanking Members from all parties for their powerful and moving contributions this afternoon. Those of us who visited the camps made a commitment to the Rohingya people that we would not just walk away from what we had seen, and that when we came back we would raise the situation that they face and ask for two things: that the humanitarian aid would continue and be stepped up so that their conditions in the camps are made more tolerable; and that we use our role as MPs to put pressure on our own Government and the international community to come to an agreement with Myanmar and solve this problem for the longer term, so that they would be given safe return to Myanmar, that that would be overseen by the international community and, critically, that they would be given citizenship, because that is what they need in the longer term to be able to lead their lives. I thank the Minister for his comments, and we will continue to work with him.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
Charitable Fundraising Websites

[Mr Philip Hollobone in the Chair]

4 pm

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered charitable fundraising websites and associated charges.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. Britain is a nation of givers. More than 160,000 charities are registered in England and Wales, and, thanks to the generosity of the British public, last year they raised almost £10 billion in donations. We all immensely value their role in our communities and public services, and I know that Members will join me in thanking them for the tremendous part they play in providing support for vulnerable and local community groups.

Charities contribute to every walk of life, such as medical research, animal welfare and local hospices, to name but a few. However, larger organisations such as Cancer Research UK, the British Heart Foundation and Oxfam—those with incomes of more than £5 million—make up only 1% of registered charities, and 40% of charities have an income of less than £10,000 a year. Those charities tend to be embedded in our communities, often engaging with local causes.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I know that my hon. Friend will raise some interesting points, but will she also join me in recognising that today is Giving Tuesday? That provides a good opportunity for us all to celebrate the work across the country of the small charities that she refers to, as well as local, national and international charities.

Mary Robinson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her intervention. She is right to point out that Giving Tuesday is our opportunity to celebrate the volunteers who work in our communities to raise money for charities.

Charities rely largely on donors and Government grants for their income. Over the past decade, donating to charities online has become a well-established practice. Websites such as BT MyDonate, Virgin Money Giving and JustGiving, which is the largest site, have become the go-to places to donate to charities. Such platforms allow donors to search for their preferred charity and donate money using their smartphones, computers and other electronic devices. In a few clicks, donors can register their debit or credit card, choose their charitable cause and donate.

Last year, websites, social media and apps accounted for more than £2.4 billion in donations, representing 26%, or one in four, of all donations made in the United Kingdom. That figure will only increase as charities adapt to the evolving technological landscape. People like using online platforms because they provide a hassle-free way to present a fundraising case, and they allow individual donors to set up their own mini fundraising campaigns for causes close to their heart. Indeed, many hon. Members may have used the sites to raise money for charities in their own constituencies, perhaps by running the London or Manchester marathons, or by climbing Kilimanjaro—if they are very athletic and adventurous.

Rather than using traditional means of donation, such as cheques or bank transfers, young donors in particular find it far more convenient to donate to charities through online platforms. If we look at the spread of donations across age, we see that last year 58% of donors who contributed online were aged between 16 and 44. Many charities also find using third-party sites more convenient. They provide a huge bonus by attracting funds from friends and family who fundraise on a smaller scale for large charities, such as for the hugely successful Motor Neurone Disease Association ice bucket challenge some years ago.

However, the ability to raise funds generally comes at a cost. Most online giving platforms charge charities an administration or transaction fee for processing each donation. Those typically range from zero to £2 per donation and can make a significant difference to the overall amount that a charity receives, especially if the total comes from many small donations that are all subject to a fee. There are also set-up or monthly rental charges that charities pay for a presence on fundraising websites.

Most fundraising platforms are not-for-profit organisations, although a few sites are run for profit. JustGiving is run for profit. Charities, depending on their size, are required to pay a monthly subscription fee to JustGiving of up to £39, plus VAT, and are charged a 5% fee on the amount raised. The fee is taken from the gift aid received, if eligible, or is deducted from the total if no gift aid can be claimed. Virgin Money Giving is a non-profit company. Charities registering with it are required to pay a one-off set-up fee of £150 and it takes a 2% fee on donations, but all the gift aid is received by the charity.

I declare an interest as a Greater Manchester Member of Parliament, because one online fundraiser, the Wonderful Organisation, is located in Manchester. Wonderful.org is the only site in the UK not to charge any fees. Its core belief is that charities should receive 100% of donations from their fundraising efforts, including gift aid. It is a non-profit organisation run by volunteers and funded entirely by corporate sponsorship from philanthropic businesses, which guarantees that charities, fundraisers and sponsors pay nothing and that the charity or good cause gets all the benefits in full.

As hon. Members may have gathered, the landscape for charities and giving sites is confusing. Transparency is therefore a fundamental issue facing the sector. A recent survey revealed that almost 80% of the people who use the largest run-for-profit platform are unaware that it is a for-profit business. To put that into context, when we register for a bank account or credit card, we understand that institutions have a legal responsibility to explain to customers certain charges and fees that they may be obligated to pay. With large sums being donated and handled, transparency is important.

It is apparent that when people donate online many are unaware of the fees and charges. The sector is telling me that users are simply not aware or do not know. For example, in the wake of the Grenfell Tower fire, Karolina Hanusova created a fundraising page on JustGiving. Through her fantastic efforts, she raised more than £400,000 for the survivors and victims of the fire, but £25,000 of the total was taken in processing fees. Karolina was surprised to find that such a significant amount was deducted from the total raised.

Karolina’s case is not uncommon. Immediately following the Manchester Arena bombing in May, the Manchester Evening News began an appeal, raising £2.5 million
through the JustGiving website, but that was subject to deductions of £100,000 in fees. Time and again, I have come across users who registered with fundraising websites but were not aware of such substantial charges being taken from the donated funds. Users need to be aware of the costs and fees so that they can make an informed choice, just as we would expect with any other financial body. The payment process needs to be clear from start to finish.

Public trust in charities is critical and has become a key question over recent years following various crises and media coverage of the sector. Worryingly, this year’s Charities Aid Foundation report revealed that only 50% of the population—half, that is—believe that charities are trustworthy. Clearly, that has to be taken seriously by the sector, and I believe that the sector is now doing that.

I understand that the Charity Commission and the Fundraising Regulator recently met 14 major UK giving platforms to discuss these issues and to agree principles collectively to increase public understanding and transparency. Online fundraising platforms have agreed to provide information to the Fundraising Regulator about their complaints process, and to work with the regulators and the Government to explore how their transparency on fees and charges can be improved.

I am pleased that registration with the Fundraising Regulator is now open to third-party fundraisers, offering platforms an opportunity to demonstrate a public commitment to meeting the highest standards for fundraising. I urge the Government to encourage platforms that have not yet registered to consider doing so and signing up to the code of practice.

However, the Fundraising Regulator is a self-regulating body with no formal powers, so I further ask the Minister, what powers can be granted to the regulator to give it some teeth in dealing with platforms that do not adhere to the code of conduct? All charities must submit their accounts or annual returns to the Charity Commission, and those are available to view on the commission’s website. One benefit of compulsory charity registration is increased transparency across the sector. Perhaps the Fundraising Regulator could replicate that best practice. I suggest that to move towards that aim and promote best practice and transparency, online platforms should also be encouraged to submit their accounts to the commission or Fundraising Regulator.

Anecdotally, many people assume that fundraising platforms are themselves charities. They are not. They are more akin to agents or intermediaries. Although I am of the opinion that not-for-profit platforms are a better fit for the charitable sector, they too have operating costs that are ultimately borne by charities. Card-processing fees are the principal culprit. All charities must pay transaction fees on receipt of donations from PayPal, credit cards and major banks.

I have met representatives of Wonderful.org, whose running costs are covered by corporate sponsors. That is a great initiative. Will the Minister highlight what steps the Government are taking to encourage large corporations and banks to engage with the charitable sector on this issue? For instance, they might provide assistance by exempting card charges and processing fees. After all, corporate responsibility is at the core of many banking companies’ charitable activities, and that would be one way to engage with charities that clearly matter to the general public.

I would like to mention gift aid. Some platforms use a part of taxpayers’ gift aid—a scheme enabling charities to reclaim tax on donations—to cover their costs. Gift aid is a significant cog in the charitable sector. It increases the value of donations to charities by allowing them to reclaim basic rate tax on donations as long as the donor pays tax. Charities can take the donation and reclaim the basic rate of tax from Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs.

Since the introduction of gift aid in 1990, more than £13 billion in relief has been paid to UK charities. The commitment of this and previous Governments to supporting and expanding gift aid has been a tremendous boost to charitable fundraising—currently, it allows charities to claim an extra £25 for every £100 donated—but although some sites automatically pass on the full amount, others do not. In my opinion, the gift aid reclaimed should benefit the relevant charity, rather than being used to pay an intermediary cost.

I believe that the way forward must be ensuring, with guidance from the Fundraising Regulator and the Charity Commission, that online fundraising platforms are transparent and clear from the outset. I am encouraged by the action that has been taken to update the regulator’s code of practice, but I seek further assurance that the Government will take on board fundraisers’ concerns to make the process as transparent as it needs to be and get more people giving with confidence to our wonderful charities and good causes.

4.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): It is a pleasure,

as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson) for bringing such a topical and important issue to our attention.

We should celebrate the fact that we are a generous nation. As my hon. Friend said, Charities Aid Foundation research indicates that the British public donated about £10 billion to charity in 2016, making the UK the most generous nation in Europe and one of the most generous in the world. Today is Giving Tuesday, the global day of giving that encourages people to volunteer, donate to charity and spread the word about doing good stuff. Last year, 4.5 million people in the UK gave their time or money to charity on Giving Tuesday, and for the second year running the campaign broke the world record for the most money donated online in 24 hours.

Many people need to be asked before they give, so charities have to invest some of their money in fundraising in order to raise funds to undertake their important work. According to the National Council for Voluntary Organisations, every £1 that a charity invests in fundraising raises an average of £4 in return. Fundraising, when done well, also means that charities can develop positive relationships with their supporters.

Recent years have seen the emergence and rapid growth of online fundraising platforms as a new and convenient way for people to donate to charity or other causes. Huge sums are raised for charity through online fundraising platforms. The largest, JustGiving, has helped people to raise more than £3 billion for good causes.
since 2001. We need only look at the incredible public generosity and use of online fundraising platforms following recent tragic events such as the Grenfell tower fire and the terrorist attacks in London and Manchester to gauge the popularity of that form of fundraising. However, fundraising must be undertaken responsibly by all if public trust is to be maintained.

Sadly, in 2015, charity fundraising came into the spotlight for all the wrong reasons, risking public trust and confidence in charity. Two years on, the charity sector has taken responsibility and embraced change. It set up a new independent and effective self-regulatory body, the Fundraising Regulator, which has worked with fundraisers and charities to strengthen and enforce the code of practice. It has implemented the Fundraising Preference Service, enabling members of the public to easily put a stop to unwanted fundraising requests. Charities and their trustees have embraced higher standards. They are monitoring and overseeing their fundraising activities much more closely, and are strengthening their data protection policies and practices.

My hon. Friend asked whether we could give the Fundraising Regulator more teeth. The regulator regulates the fundraising community by consent. Working with the sector, it has taken major steps to strengthen the regulation of fundraising and ensure that the public are protected from poor practices. Where there is deliberate abuse or unlawful activity, it is for the Fundraising Regulator to report to the relevant statutory regulators—for example, the Charity Commission, the Information Commissioner or the Financial Conduct Authority, and in appropriate cases the police—and encourage them to use their statutory powers. We think that effective self-regulation rather than Government intervention can deliver on the public’s expectations.

As my hon. Friend also mentioned, recent online fundraising has shed light on the need for improved standards of transparency and accountability for online fundraising platforms. The issues include a lack of transparency about website fees and charges, the potential for online fraudulent activity, and the need for the public to have access to good advice about online giving. We need to ensure that high standards and best practice are shared and followed across all online fundraising platforms. That is why, earlier this year, I asked the Fundraising Regulator and the Charity Commission to work with the online fundraising platforms to address public concerns and promote high standards and good practice.

The Fundraising Regulator and the Charity Commission convened a summit with 14 of the largest online fundraising platforms in September. The aim was to agree collectively on principles to increase public understanding and transparency about the different forms of online donating, in order to secure public trust and confidence. I am pleased to report a positive response from the online fundraising platforms and a number of commitments from their meeting with the regulators. They have confirmed their commitment to transparency on fees and charges and have agreed to work with the Charity Commission and Fundraising Regulator to explore how that can be improved. They have also agreed to disseminate clear and consistent public advice about the choices available for donating. They will review their resilience to fraud and help the regulators to review the code of fundraising practice with the aim of expanding the standards for online fundraising.

On fees and charges, we need to recognise that there is a range of commercial and not-for-profit organisations that operate as online fundraising platforms. In addition to the debit and credit card transaction fees that apply in all cases, there are significant costs to be covered in providing the service. That is the case for online fundraising platforms and for traditional methods. In some cases, those costs or a proportion of them are subsidised by associated businesses as part of their social responsibility programmes, reducing the proportion of fees that comes out of individual donors’ gifts. In other cases, fees are taken from the donation or any gift aid on the donation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle asked about gift aid and the fees that are taken from the total value of the donation plus gift aid. That is the case regardless of whether the platform says that the fees are taken from the body of the donation or from the gift aid that is paid on top of it. Platforms also take responsibility for processing gift aid claims on a charity’s behalf, including any associated reporting and audit requirements. As always, we continue to have discussions with those involved. It is important that in all cases any charges and fees are reasonable and transparent, so that donors can make an informed choice. I welcome the decision that some fundraising platforms took to waive or reduce their fees, or to make a donation, in relation to fundraising for disasters such as the Grenfell Tower fire and the terror attacks earlier this year.

My hon. Friend asked whether we could put pressure on the industry to reduce debit and credit transaction fees. I assure her that UK card processing fees of generally between 1% and 2% compare favourably with the payment processing fees charged in other countries, which are usually higher—significantly so in some cases. I am fairly certain that members of the industry will be watching this debate and they are welcome to discuss what they can do to help support charities’ fundraising efforts with me and my colleagues.

The Charity Commission and Fundraising Regulator will continue to work with the online fundraising platforms and will keep me updated on progress. They sent me a letter yesterday that outlined current progress, which I am happy to share with my hon. Friend. Those platforms provide an important service that is popular with the public and raises significant sums for charity. They have shown that they are willing and committed to work with the regulators and the Government to respond to public concerns and to strengthen standards and transparency. I welcome that, and I hope that other hon. Members do too.

Again, I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate, particularly on Giving Tuesday. I am willing to continue the conversation outside this Chamber.

Question put and agreed to.
Rural Economy of Wales

4.23 pm

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of the rural economy in Wales.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am grateful for the opportunity to have a debate on a topic that is of great importance to the people of Ceredigion, whom I serve, and a subject that is close to my heart.

An economic strategy that facilitates growth in rural and urban Wales and forges stronger links between them is sorely needed if we are to avoid building a geographically unbalanced Welsh economy. I hope that we can debate the ways in which the current approach fails rural Wales and how those failings can be addressed. The rural economy is resilient and there is potential for greater development that should not be left unrealised. At the very least, I hope to persuade hon. Members that securing a prosperous future for the Welsh rural economy is not a cause that should be championed only by those fortunate enough to represent rural constituencies; it should be a priority for us all. As such, it is good to see right hon. and hon. Members from urban as well as rural constituencies here, and I look forward to their contributions.

The development of the rural economy should form a key part of an economic strategy for Wales if we are to avoid a national economy unhelpfully concentrated in a few areas or in one corner of the country. We need look no further than the UK economy to understand the consequences of an unbalanced approach to economic development. Page 218 of the “Industrial Strategy” White Paper illustrates all too clearly how focusing development to a void a national economy unhelpfully concentrated in a few areas or in one corner of the country. We need to build a more mixed economy on them, and in so doing secure a more prosperous future for rural areas. It is therefore important to stress that if a growth deal is produced for mid-Wales, it cannot mindlessly replicate the model used for city deals. The Government must do more than merely pay lip-service to the idea; they should work with the Welsh Government to engage with stakeholders and forge a bespoke package that focuses on addressing the unique challenges and opportunities facing the rural economy.

One fundamental problem that could be addressed by a worthwhile growth deal is the poor connectivity in many rural areas of Wales. Broadband, or rather the lack of it, is by far the most prevalent issue raised by my constituents in Ceredigion, which is among the 10 worst constituencies for broadband speeds—an affliction that also plagues the Minister’s constituency. Wales has the perceived benefit of being able to receive investment from the Welsh Government and the UK Government, but thus far both have failed to outline how broadband will be delivered to some of the most rural parts of the country.

Recently, the UK Government invested significant sums to improve broadband infrastructure in three of the four UK nations, but unfortunately not Wales. They managed to find £20 million extra for ultrafast broadband in Northern Ireland. For the time being, I am confident that residents in Ceredigion would happily settle for the four UK nations, but unfortunately not Wales. They managed to find £20 million extra for ultrafast broadband in Northern Ireland. For the time being, I am confident that residents in Ceredigion would happily settle for
Why stop there? A potential growth deal for the Welsh midlands—sorry, for mid-Wales—could also include an ambitious package of investment in transport infrastructure. Reopening the railway line between Aberystwyth and Carmarthen would help to reconnect north and south Wales. Installing a network of electric vehicle charging points would allow rural Wales to make the most of advances in electric cars. As well as improving connectivity, such investment by the UK and Welsh Governments would send a clear signal to budding entrepreneurs and start-ups that the countryside is open for business. It would be a strong statement of intent and confidence.

I am not alone in thinking that rural Wales is worth such an investment. Ceredigion has almost 9,000 microbusinesses, which account for up to 94% of all businesses in the constituency. They sustain the local economy and make up our communities, yet they are penalised by poor all-round connectivity. Improving that connectivity is key to supporting and sustaining those entrepreneurial, innovative and hugely important businesses while opening the door to new enterprises.

I am conscious that other hon. Members wish to speak, but it would be remiss of me not to speak briefly about the need to secure the current foundations of the rural economy, or about how a potential growth deal could help to steady nerves in what is proving to be a most uncertain time. Food and drink manufacturing contributes £1.5 billion to the Welsh economy, supports more than 22,000 jobs and generates more than £330 million in exports. It sits at the heart of the food and drink supply chain that generates a total of £4.5 billion for the economy and supports more than 240,000 jobs across Wales. Agriculture in Ceredigion directly employs more than 6,000 people. Some £40.8 million is spent on goods and services purchased by farmers, which in turn sustains additional spending of £96.9 million.

Although they are seldom associated with the rural economy, the teaching and research conducted in our universities also make a vital contribution: on Ceredigion’s economy, the teaching and research conducted in our universities have an annual economic impact of £96.9 million.

I am deeply concerned that Welsh agriculture will be sacrificed in EU negotiations. We will have to compete with markets with far lower food hygiene and animal welfare standards, while losing unrestricted access to our main export market. Welsh farmers will be hardest hit by the double whammy of cheap imports and new regulatory barriers. A staggering 90% of Welsh food and drink produce, produced mainly in rural areas such as mine, is exported easily, directly and freely to the European Union. Do the Government expect farmers simply to replace 90% of their customers overnight? We desperately need certainty and clarity.

The damaging impact of Brexit uncertainty on the whole rural economy should not be underestimated. The National Farmers Union’s farm confidence survey in April showed that 20% of farmers are likely to reduce investment as a result. Without clarity on trading relationships or the support payments that make up to 80% of farm incomes in Wales, it is hardly surprising that many are postponing further investment in their businesses. That should alarm us all, because for every £1 invested in the farming industry, more than £7.40 is put back into the local economy. Our communities simply cannot afford to lose such investment. Without it, the future of the rural economy looks very bleak indeed.

Tourism is a £2.8 billion Welsh industry that employs 4,000 people in Ceredigion and contributes £70 million to gross value added. It often goes hand in hand with agriculture and is an important contributor to the rural economy. Plaid Cymru has proposed a 15% reduction in VAT for the tourism and hospitality sector, which would generate an estimated 5,500 additional jobs and an economic boost of £166 million. Our proposal is not innovative or pioneering thinking, but simply common sense. It would stimulate investment, create jobs, increase consumer spending and help to ensure that Wales’s visitor economy continues to thrive. Even the UK Government think it is a good idea: the Chancellor announced a review of tourism VAT in his Budget, although of course it applied only to Northern Ireland. If it is good enough for Northern Ireland, why is it not good enough for us? Could it not be included as part of a growth deal package for the Welsh midlands—sorry, mid-Wales? At the very least, it should offer resources to support organisations such as Mynyddoedd Cambria that work to forge closer links between the old market towns of the Elenydd—the Cambrian mountains—and ensure that coastal and inland areas benefit from tourism.

It is deeply frustrating that the potential of the Welsh rural economy was not adequately pursued in last week’s Budget, but a growth deal could be the first step towards correcting that mistake. Offering the support and investment required to sustain today’s rural economy will be crucial,
but just as important is the opportunity to change how the rural economy is understood, recast how rural development is pursued, and rejuvenate our aspirations for such development. Such new thinking is already being explored by colleagues of mine, including a former Member of this House. The economic region of Arfor aims to develop west Wales into a more cohesive and connected entity. There is no reason why a growth deal for the Welsh midlands—or mid-Wales—could not support and work in conjunction with such an economic area.

I have already mentioned the importance of the agriculture, food and tourism sectors to today’s rural economy. Let us make the most of the opportunity presented by the growth deal to redefine the rural economy of tomorrow. If done properly, such a deal could begin to address the issues plaguing today’s industries and could implement the conditions necessary to facilitate a more versatile future for the rural economy. It could concentrate on improving connectivity and offering greater support to higher education institutions so that they can build on their expertise and cement themselves as centres for the technologies of the future.

After all, why should rural Wales not be at the forefront of biotechnology and research? It could be the centre of cutting-edge knowledge, tackling global issues such as food security. Aberystwyth University’s institute of biological, environmental and rural sciences is already an internationally renowned research and teaching centre for biotechnology and environment studies. It is leading the work to address some of the most pressing issues facing the agricultural sector, and it has already received support from the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council for its Aberystwyth innovation and enterprise campus. Just imagine the potential benefits of further investment in our other universities in rural Wales! Such investment could serve as the foundation of a bigger Welsh biotechnology industry, shaping the future of food and farming for generations and increasing the breadth of highly skilled and highly paid careers available in rural Wales. That is just one example that is open to the rural economy if we wish to explore it.

I am in no doubt that the Welsh and UK Governments desperately need to reconsider their approach to economic development and to refocus attention on the rural economy, to ensure that it forms an integral part of any economic strategy for Wales and that it is more than a simple afterthought, an also-ran, a non-essential addition to the real work of developing our cities and urban areas.

People should have a realistic hope of being able to pursue a career, and of being able to afford to settle down and lead a prosperous life in any part of Wales. I hope the Minister accepts the points I have raised in the spirit in which they are offered. The possibilities for a mixed and advanced rural economy in Wales are endless, provided that the potential is unlocked with the right investment and the right growth deal for the Welsh midlands—or mid-Wales.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. The debate is due to finish at 5.30 pm, which means that, under the rules of the House, I need to call the first of the Front-Bench spokesmen at seven minutes past 5. There are guideline limits of five minutes for the Scottish National party, five minutes for Her Majesty’s Opposition from 10 minutes for the Minister, with three minutes for Mr Lake to sum up at the end. Three Members are seeking to catch my eye, which means that there will be a time limit of eight minutes for each of them.

4.41 pm

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. Congratulations are very much in order for the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake), the Member for the Welsh midlands—I like the sound of that. I am not sure what the comparative term would be for Members from north Wales; I think we will stick to north Wales. [Interruption. I Right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson) said, “Scotland”. We will stick to north Wales—we have better weather, I think.

I am conscious of the importance of the subject of the debate. My own constituency includes many rural communities. I will not be able to name them all, which risks offending people, but in its 240 square miles the villages in the Ceiriog valley, Minera, Llangollen, Corwen, Cynnwyd, Glyndyfrwd, Carrog. Llandrillo, many of the Maelor villages and many other areas the main industry of which may not be farming but which involves a considerable amount of agriculture. I was interested to hear from the National Farmers Union Cymru that about 60,000 people in Wales are employed full or part-time in Welsh agriculture. That is a staggering number, especially when one considers the ramifications for other industries in those areas.

I do not always quote the Countryside Alliance, but I would like to do so today. [Interruption. I am glad that the hon. Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) agrees with me. The points that the Countryside Alliance has made on the issue are superb. It notes, for instance, that Wales exported £12.3 billion-worth of goods outside the UK in 2015, of which 67% went to the European Union. It makes the point that it is vital that the UK Government seek to maintain tariff-free access to the EU markets for our agricultural produce. It notes also that if the UK Government do not establish a new trade agreement with the EU before leaving and do not adopt World Trade Organisation terms, the £12 billion-worth of food and agricultural produce that the UK exports to the EU each year will face the prospect of high tariffs, which would be damaging to UK producers, including those in Wales, and to EU consumers. That shows that the future of the Welsh rural economy is inextricably linked to what happens in, and how the UK Government and others deal with, the Brexit negotiations.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn made the point well about beef and lamb exports. We also need to note that farmers in Wales must never become a bargaining chip. If the UK Government—in their trade deals with large meat-exporting countries, such as New Zealand, Australia, Brazil and the USA—do not listen to our farming industry, that will be devastating for our rural economies. I know that the Minister has always, in himself, made positive noises about our relations with the EU, and I make the point to him that where there is a transfer of powers post-Brexit in areas that are currently devolved, it is vital that those powers are devolved to the Welsh Government.
One spark of light after Brexit—if it ever happens—might be what happens with the common agricultural policy, or CAP. The NFU, in what I think is the reverse of spin, made the point that although Wales has only 4.7% of the UK population it has 9% of the UK CAP allowances. I do not think that that was meant to be spin; I think it was meant to show how important the rural economy is to Wales. If we are to look at a new CAP that will apply Wales-wide and UK-wide, we need to reshape it in a way that makes it less interested in supporting the likes of the Duke of Westminster and more interested in supporting the Welsh hill farmer—for the many, not the few, and for small family farms.

Tourism, of course, is vital to any discussion on the Welsh economy, and I was delighted that the “Under the Arches” festival at Pontcysyllte aqueduct in my constituency won a prestigious north Wales tourism award. There is so much in my area that is connected with tourism, such as the Llangollen railway extending, as it will fairly soon, into the middle of Corwen; the Dee Valley area of outstanding natural beauty; and as it will fairly soon, into the middle of Corwen; the Dee Valley area of outstanding natural beauty; and much that is developing in the Ceiriog valley and in many other places. Will the Minister support our plans locally for the vital adaptation of Ruabon station so that there can be better disability access? I am sure he would wish to support those efforts.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that that worthwhile step would best be made in conjunction with the introduction of a half-hourly service between Chester and Shrewsbury, along one of the most beautiful railway lines in the United Kingdom, so that more people from the west midlands and the north-west of England, as well as from the rest of the country, could see just how good it is?

Susan Elan Jones: That is a wonderful idea.

I would also like to mention the Welsh Government’s rural development programme. It has been innovative, with support for food, timber and other businesses, as well as farm business grants and even a micro small business fund. Many companies in my constituency, and other areas, have benefited, and I welcome the diversity of projects it provides.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Is it not the case that the Labour Government’s economic policy for rural Wales has been a complete and utter failure? Does the hon. Lady agree with Baroness Morgan, who also serves in the Assembly, that there needs to be a dedicated economic plan for rural areas in Wales, and that that indicates that the Welsh Government have failed?

Susan Elan Jones: The hon. Gentleman always puts it so well in his own way, does he not? The points my good colleague Baroness Morgan made referred to the need for development programmes in specific areas. In the same way as we speak of the north Wales deal, I think she was thinking of something dedicated specifically to certain parts of west Wales. I think that the hon. Gentleman is being a bit mischievous in referring to our elected Government in Wales as a failure.

On the Welsh Government’s budget for the forthcoming year, I very much welcome the extra support on homelessness in the £340 million for the building of 20,000 affordable homes. We need to recognise that homelessness is not just an urban problem. I also welcome the courageous decision to suspend the right to buy on council houses. That was not an easy decision, and it was not uncontroversial in its day, but it made the point. The hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) might agree with me a little more on this point: if we are serious about tai, gwaith, iaith—houses, jobs, language—as a driver in rural Wales, we must look at that sort of policy.

I will say a quick word on rural areas in Wales. Welsh-speaking areas and planning laws. I very much support the Welsh Labour Government’s policy—it is supported by others, too—for 1 million Welsh speakers in Wales. That is an important policy, and consensus on it is vital.

I sometimes think we are a little reticent in Wales when it comes to planning issues. In some cases, that is simply because of our history as a nation, and that is a mistake. In Cornwall, Cumbria and other parts of the UK, people are prepared to look thoughtfully at issues connected with second homes and affordability. As we look at the rural economy and parts of Welsh-speaking Wales, we should not be frightened of doing that.

Finally, one has to say something about broadband. I am delighted to have been able to work with other representatives in making Gwynfryn, Llandrillo and a few other places a bit more connected. I welcome the Superfast Cymru project, but we have more to do to ensure that that is connected in every part of Wales.

4.50 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) on securing this significant debate. As the youngest Welsh MP—I do not know whether he likes me reminding him of that fact—it is evident that he has already played an inspiring role in representing his constituency and his country.

Considering the interest in this debate and the comments that have already been made, I will be as brief as possible and confine my remarks to one key issue: addressing the need to counterbalance the dynamics in Wales between the east and the west. There is a cognitive block in viewing the geography of Wales in terms of north and south, and that in turn blocks our growth as a nation. Undoubtedly there are some unifying factors among north Walians—the gogs, as we call ourselves—and our compatriots in the south. For example, the gogs will always call milk “llefrith”, and the south will wrongly insist on having borrowed the word from Latin and so call it “laeth”. We do enjoy these differences, but let us never forget that the language unites us along a north-south axis, while our historic infrastructure and economic convention would have us looking east-west all the time.

Wales’s cities and large towns generally lie in the east, but in the west, rural Wales is made up of villages and market towns. The public sector, agriculture and tourism are the pillars of the economy in those communities. None the less, it is in those rural villages and towns that we find the highest concentration of Welsh speakers, and I am proud to represent Dwyfor Meirionnydd, the constituency with the highest proportion of Welsh speakers anywhere in the world. Sadly, in my constituency and other rural Welsh constituencies, we also find some of the lowest wages in Europe. As already noted by other Members, the economies of the region—the public
sector, agriculture and tourism—are teetering on the brink of crisis. We cherish all those economies, but they are all vulnerable.

With massive outflows of young productive people, EU funding at risk and a Westminster Government hunkered down in the south-east and, frankly, focused solely on the needs and interests of that region, rural Wales faces unprecedented challenges. This re-formulation or resetting of how our nation of Wales could be perceived is best summed up by the work of my colleague Adam Price AM. He is sitting in the Public Gallery, and I welcome him. His concept of Arfor would see a new socioeconomic map drawn for Wales along a more appropriate boundary, acknowledging the east-west norm, but also looking at the issue from an alternative and counter-balancing north-south axis. That would not only allow investment to be more appropriately targeted to suit areas in the east and west, but foster greater north-south integration. That simple re-imagining or re-perceiving could not only save economies and communities, but safeguard our language and those rare communities where Welsh is not a minority language and is used by the majority. That is important to our perception of the use of the language. Bringing these majority Welsh speaking areas together to offer real opportunities for young Welsh speakers will give our language the environment in which it can thrive into the future.

To finish, I will give three examples looking at how Arfor could energise the economy of the west of Wales and Wales as a whole. First, we could transform tourism jobs from being a gap-year filler to offering the living wage and a long-term career. As a first step, we could set up a tourism academy linking business to universities and further education colleges to ensure we have the skills and expertise we need—skills made in Wales, for the needs of Wales, for the salaries of Wales and that stay with us.

Secondly, we could have a community bank for west Wales. As commercial banks disappear from our high streets—even ATMs in rural areas are under threat—rural people are left without basic services. A new model of community banking could fill the gaps.

Finally, we need the conventional and digital infrastructure that will truly transform west Wales. Let us consider reopening the Aberystwyth to Carmarthen rail line and the digital infrastructure that my hon. Friend the Member for Ceredigion spoke about so eloquently. We need swiftly to move people, bits and the knowledge economy across Wales to move into the future.

Rural Wales has been the cauldron of Welsh culture and remains the heartland of our language and its traditions. Let it be the pair dadeni—the cauldron of rebirth. Economically, it faces its greatest challenge in traditions. Let it be the pair dadeni—the cauldron of rebirth. Economically, it faces its greatest challenge in modern history, yet I am confident, despite everything and everyone—or gwaetha pawb a phopeth—that we need only to be given the tools to build our own future.

4.56 pm

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I genuinely congratulate the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) on the tone he set in opening the debate. I pay tribute to him and his predecessor Mark Williams, who for many years adopted the same tone of consensus in Wales. He brought people together to speak as Welsh MPs in the House of Commons.

I congratulate the NFU on providing a concise brief, much of which the hon. Gentleman referred to, and I make no apologies in echoing some of the statistics that it provided. Indeed, farming unions have been helpful to Members over many years, and I pay tribute to the work they do not just for their members, but for the communities of rural Wales. They play a very positive role in the social fabric of Wales, and I thank them for that.

I will concentrate my contribution on a matter that has been affecting my constituents for a long time, but in particular since 2010: the over-centralisation of many of the UK Government’s services, away from rural and semi-rural areas to the towns and cities of Wales and the UK. I will also touch on food and drink and the importance of agriculture, tourism and connectivity.

The Welsh food and drink industry is hugely important, as the hon. Gentleman said, to the whole economy of urban and rural Wales. The backbone of the food industry is Welsh agriculture. As has been said, it is a progressive, outward-looking industry that exports much of its produce across the European Union—some 90% of it is freely traded across the EU. A third of the lamb that the United Kingdom exports is Welsh lamb, which is without a doubt the finest lamb in the UK. It is hugely important, and we need to pay tribute to our agriculture industry and our farmers and offer them help and support.

I know the Minister listens carefully to what is said and represents our views to Government as a Minister in the Wales Office. He talks about securing EU funding to 2020, but I challenge him to go further than that. Our farming industry needs safeguarding post-Brexit. The money we receive from the common agricultural policy needs to be ring-fenced. If the funding is done through the Barnett formula, we will lose out. That is the challenge for the Government. When they talk about agriculture and rural Wales, they need to safeguard the monies we receive now. Alternatively, the Minister can tell us exactly how he will replenish that money.

Liz Saville Roberts: I beg the hon. Gentleman to bring to bear what influence he can on the Welsh Government to get them to commit to maintaining the same level of income for farmers when that money is transferred from Westminster under the devolved processes, whatever they may be.

Albert Owen: That is the point I was making: it should not just go through the Barnett formula, because we would lose out by getting only a certain percentage. We need like-for-like funding, because when the European Union negotiates the amount, it looks at need in a way that is fairer to rural communities.

Connectivity is also important. In north-west Wales, and indeed in Ceredigion on the west coast of Wales, we suffer from a double whammy in being not just rural communities, but peripheral communities. Often a Cardiff or London-centric view predominate in the United Kingdom, so we have to fight harder for services and the connectivity that we deserve. I consider north-west
Wales to be the heart of the British Isles. I do not see it as peripheral; it is only peripheral to someone looking up towards it from down south. It is the heart of the British Isles, because to our West is the island of Ireland and Northern Ireland, to our north is Scotland, and to our east is England. We are the heart of the British Isles, and need to start speaking with that confidence.

When there are roll-outs of programmes such as 5G, which we heard about in the Budget, it should be started and test-piloted in difficult rural areas, not just in the large towns and cities of the United Kingdom. That is the challenge for the Wales Office in the UK Government. Swansea, deserves its connectivity, but so too does rural Wales. If the Government are serious about spreading wealth across the United Kingdom, they need to pilot projects in rural and peripheral areas.

Simon Hart: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the technology already exists? It is available in the Alps, in Norway, and in the highlands of Scotland. The technology is, to some extent, proven. What is actually required, as I am sure the Minister will confirm, is political will.

Albert Owen: The hon. Gentleman has asked me a question and answered it in the way that I would have: it does require political will. Each time the Government trial something, I ask them to go not for the easy towns and cities, but for rural and peripheral areas.

Tourism is hugely important. It is the fastest-growing industry in the United Kingdom and in the world, and we have some of the best brands in Wales. Many visitors to Wales come for our coastline, our national parks, our areas of outstanding natural beauty, and the tranquillity, which is best seen on the Isle of Anglesey—the heart of the British Isles. In my opinion, Anglesey is very much the jewel in the crown of Welsh tourism. There are, however, serious challenges in rural Wales. If we are to develop a 21st-century economy, we need 21st-century tools to do the job. As I said, in the digital age we do have better connectivity in broadband and mobile, but it is still behind many parts of the UK. We should address that problem, and the Ministers from the Wales Office need to fight for it.

I commend the roll-out package that was put together in partnership between the UK Government, the Welsh Government, the EU and BT. I hope that the EU money can be replenished in some way in the future, because that package has worked in many places. I have been working with BT, the Welsh Government, and indeed the Ministers in the Wales Office, including the Minister here today, who has listened to what I and other Members have been saying.

When I talk about rural Wales, I talk about inter-dependency with urban Wales as well, which is very important. My main point is about the centralisation of UK Government services. We have seen court closures over many years, which not only result in denial of local access to justice but damage to local economies. Many of the local economies created by solicitors’ offices and the extra boost given to the economy by the areas around the courts are lost for good. Many personnel move from those areas to where the courts move to. We have seen HMRC, for example, moving its offices from the west to the east, to central Wales, down to Cardiff. That does not help rural economies in north and northwest Wales.

Ian C. Lucas: I am afraid this is an irresistible opportunity to talk about the Government’s appalling proposal to shift HMRC from Wrexham in north Wales, my constituency, which has many rural areas, to Cardiff’s city centre. Is that not exactly the opposite of what we should be doing?

Albert Owen: Yes, it is. The Government talk, as many Governments do, about decentralisation and devolution of services, but they act in the opposite way, pulling out services from rural areas. Those rural areas have very competent people, with the skill sets to do those jobs for many years. The services are being moved just to save the Government money, and in the long run communities are getting left behind. My final point has nothing to do with the Government, although the Government need to take some responsibility. We need to get proper banking policy in this country. When high street banks close in rural areas and in small and larger towns, it rips the heart out of those communities. Local government, the Welsh Government and the UK taxpayer are paying for those communities, yet banks just walk away. We know what banks have done to our global economy; we see the recession across the world and in this country. Those banks have responsibilities, but we need to plug those gaps, because often buildings are left empty, jobs are lost and the local high street suffers.

Rural Wales needs a strong voice and, with Welsh MPs across the parties, we have one. We also need a Government here in the UK that are listening and putting devolution into practice, with real delivery of jobs and services in our rural communities, so that rural and urban Wales can compete on a level playing field with the rest of the United Kingdom. I thank the hon. Member for Ceredigion for giving me the opportunity to say that, because I want to stand up in future and say how much better things are in Wales because rural and urban areas have worked together to create the best place to live, work and visit in the whole of the United Kingdom.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): We now come to the first of the Opposition Front-Bench speeches. The guideline limit for both the Scottish National party and the Labour party Front Benchers is 5 minutes.

5.7 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Tapadh leibh, a Cathraiche. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) on securing this timely debate. He is a passionate campaigner and champion for the people of Wales in this House. In the less than half a year that he has been here, he has done an enormous amount to hold both of Wales’s Governments to account, and I have no doubt he will continue to do so in the coming months and years.

The focus on the future of our rural economy is timely, because we stand at a fork in the road, given our Brexit negotiations. The decision of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union, which was rejected in all 32 of Scotland’s local authorities, will have potentially catastrophic consequences for rural communities across these islands—not least in Wales, which has benefited enormously from EU funding. Indeed, in some cases, it
is the only money that has come into Wales in recent years. The current negotiating position taken by Her Majesty’s Government is deeply flawed, isolationist and wrong-headed. I will outline one or two areas in which I feel a change in tone and position could help soften the forthcoming Brexit blow to our economy. I will also outline a couple of ideas from a domestic policy perspective that would deal with some of the challenges facing our Welsh colleagues.

First, I will add a bit of context to the scene so eloquently set out by the hon. Gentleman. Given that time is at a premium, and I am conscious that I am something of an intruder on this debate, I will focus solely on food and drink. Quite rightly, food and drink is a priority economic sector in Wales, with 170,000 people contributing to gross sales of £17.3 billion. Much like Scotland, Wales is staring into the abyss as we look over the cliff edge of a hard Brexit, to which we have been driven by the Back Benchers of the Conservative party. Although Wales as a whole narrowly voted to leave the EU, it is worth noting that not all areas did. Ceredigion, for example, which is mainly rural, voted 54.6% to remain, and Gwynedd, with a large agricultural industry, voted 58.9% to stay in the EU. If the Minister is serious about being Wales’s voice in Whitehall, and not Whitehall’s voice in Wales, he should immediately commit to joining the Welsh and Scottish Governments in calling for our membership of the single market and customs union to be maintained.

On trade, it is abundantly clear that access to the single market is essential for our agriculture sector. No one wants to see prime Welsh lamb, or any other fresh produce for that matter, stuck on a lorry, in a queue, waiting for customs clearance. I very much echo what the right hon. Gentleman said. I will not get into the battle about whose lamb is best—I think I might lose that one. As it stands, what will happen is that lamb will be stuck in a queue on a lorry.

On labour, it is vital that our sectors retain the ability to recruit staff from across the European Union. That is why free movement of people must be protected, which can easily be achieved by remaining in the single market. Scotland and Wales’s problem has never been immigration; it has been emigration. Just as in Scotland, Wales needs to build a strong rural economy that will encourage young people to stay, and not exacerbate the brain-drain problem outlined by the hon. Gentleman. Member for Ceredigion.

We need action on a domestic front from the Conservative Government in London as well as the Labour Government in Cardiff. It is important that we ensure that the right infrastructure is in place to support the rural economy. That means action to improve broadband provision, and investment in mobile coverage and drastically improving the rail network. To give an example, in Scotland every year we provide more than £1 billion for public transport and other sustainable options. I know from personal experience of visiting and holidaying in Wales—I spent some time in the summer of 2016 in the constituency of the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) in north Wales and I echo what he says about connectivity—that the rail network is particularly poor and could do with upgrading. The hon. Member for Ceredigion has already outlined why and how that can be done, including a rail link between Aberystwyth and Carmarthen.

Before I conclude, I want to say a word about how we support the most vulnerable and those on low incomes in our rural communities. With respect, my advice is perhaps aimed more at colleagues on the Labour benches, who would do well to take a leaf out of the SNP Scottish Government’s book and axe the bedroom tax and the public sector pay cap, which affects people in rural communities. Delivering for the many, not the few, cannot just be a soundbite. It needs to be backed up with action, because with devolved power comes devolved responsibility, and there is a moral responsibility on the Welsh Labour Government in Cardiff to act here too.

David Hanson: rise—

David Linden: If the right hon. Gentleman wants to indicate how he is going to lift the public sector pay cap, I am happy to give way.

David Hanson: I think the hon. Gentleman will find the bedroom tax is not devolved in Wales.

David Linden: My understanding is that the Welsh Government have spent something like 0.44% of what the SNP Government have spent on discretionary housing payments. I am happy to give way again if the right hon. Gentleman wants to correct that. I see he does not want to.

Wales cannot be stuck between an isolationist Government in Westminster and a lethargic Government in Wales. I very much commend the hon. Member for Ceredigion for bringing this matter to the House.

5.12 pm

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): Let me first congratulate the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake). To have a debate this late in the day and to have 10 Welsh MPs here shows the importance of the subject; to have five of them from north Wales and five of them Labour shows the importance of the debate to north Wales.

It is vital that we carefully consider how rural Wales can respond to increasing digitisation, the global economy and the challenges of leaving the European Union in a time of austerity. The Welsh Labour Government are committed to the success of their rural communities and have rolled out several initiatives to that end, but law makers in Cardiff have had their hands tied. The most recent Welsh Government budget, published in October, has been developed against a backdrop of unprecedented cuts and ongoing austerity.

In the referendum, the people of Wales did not give carte blanche to this Government to leave the single market or the customs union, or to make Wales and people in rural Wales poorer. Access to the single market and customs union membership, whether permanently or in a transitional period before long-term arrangements can be made, is necessary to provide the economic activity and jobs on which a sustainable future for rural Wales can be built. That is true of the UK generally, but especially in Wales where our economy has depended on EU funds for so many years. That investment is really appreciated in Wales, particularly by farmers and the farming community.

As has already been quoted, 67% of Welsh exports went to the EU. The corresponding figure for all food and live animal exports was 83%, for meat exports, it was 93%. Agricultural goods generally carry higher...
import tariffs than other commodities, and if this Government fail to secure tariff-free trade post-Brexit, the effects will devastate the Welsh agricultural sector overnight.

Brexit also raises challenges for Wales in the way of European subsidies and structural funds. The Minister will be aware—I have mentioned this time and again—that I helped to secure European structural funds for his county of Conwy and for my county of Denbighshire.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Guto Bebb): Did you?

Chris Ruane: The Minister should know that history. It is a huge amount of money for the whole of Wales—£320 million per year in direct subsidies from the common agricultural policy, with a further £355 million to support rural development.

I ask the Minister, as I have asked him before, to make sure that we have extra funding beyond 2020. Our urban and rural communities have been supported by extra funds from Europe over the past 17 years. We want to be treated as well by Westminster as we have been by Brussels. We have had a big dollop of jam—a big dollop of funding—for Wales. We do not want it taken away and for the jam to be spread thinly across the whole of the UK. We need that funding and the Minister must do his job and make sure that we get it.

On productivity and broadband, thanks to the efforts of the Welsh Labour Government, unemployment in rural Wales in 2016 decreased roughly in line with the Welsh average of 4% and productivity continues to increase. However, productivity in rural communities still lags behind the Welsh average. The Welsh Government recognise that and are helping boost productivity with the “Superfast Cymru” project, rolling out superfast broadband across the country. In an increasingly digital economy, the effects of high-speed internet are really needed in our rural communities. Sadly, Wales’s biggest export has been our young people. There has been a brain drain out of Wales for decades. Superfast broadband offers a chance to stop and reverse that. People want to live in rural communities, especially when they are bringing up families. To do that, they need access to superfast broadband to make sure that they can conduct their digital businesses from areas such as rural Wales.

I just want to touch on the north Wales and the mid-Wales growth funds. I ask the Minister to ensure that the funding allocated to those projects is as great as the funding allocated to city deals in England and Wales.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): If the Minister concludes his remarks no later than 5.27 pm, that will allow Mr Lake time to sum up the debate.

5.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Guto Bebb): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I also join in the congratulations for the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) on what was a very constructive speech and the tributes to his predecessor, who was also always constructive in this Chamber.

We have had a wide-ranging and constructive debate. It is a pleasure to be able to highlight some of the success stories and some of the work that needs to be done. The hon. Gentleman highlighted the need for a mid-Wales growth deal, although he was not particularly generous in his support for the comments made by the Chancellor in the Budget. I think it is a major step forward.

Since 2015, we have had a city deal for Cardiff and the 10 local authorities surrounding Cardiff and we have had a regional deal for Swansea—not just for Swansea, but for Swansea and the region surrounding Swansea, including Carmarthenshire, Neath, Port Talbot and Pembrokeshire. We are working on a growth deal for north Wales; I had the privilege yesterday to be at the acceptance of the bid from north Wales. I was joined at the session by the hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas). It was a constructive session and there was engagement across the political spectrum. We had leaders of local authorities in north Wales of all political colours. We had a Plaid leader in the session, a Plaid member who was also a leader but not currently a Plaid leader. I am not quite sure what is going on in my own county of Conwy, but we do have a good leader, who was there, and we also had leaders from other north Wales counties, who were of a Labour party persuasion.

Albert Owen: I want to say on the record what I have said to the Minister privately—that he should involve Welsh MPs from north Wales in the growth deal. Yes, let us have bottom up and get the bid, but we have a mandate from the communities as well.

Guto Bebb: I am absolutely delighted to welcome that comment. It was great to see the hon. Member for Wrexham there. In addition, I am engaging with north Wales MPs and there will be a roundtable session in Gwydyr House with the bid authors and north Wales MPs in due course.

The hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) made a very important point in highlighting the fact that growth deals are bottom up. The key thing is that the proposals from north Wales were coming in from local authorities representing the whole of north Wales. Our responsibility down here in Westminster—the responsibility of the UK Government—and the responsibly of the Welsh Government is to work constructively with the partners in north Wales.

This is the template for an approach for mid-Wales. One of the key things I am aware of as a UK Government Minister representing Wales is the importance of ensuring that we do not forget mid-Wales. One of the key things that we highlighted in the Budget is that, although of course we need to deliver a growth deal for north Wales—after all, in the context of this debate, a significant part of north Wales can undoubtedly be described as rural—we also need to deliver for mid-Wales. I want to be able to stand up and say categorically that we will have delivered growth deals for every single local authority in Wales. We have already delivered for 14 local authorities in south Wales. We are working with the six in north Wales, and we are opening the door to a deal in mid-Wales.

We passionately believe that such deals should come from the bottom up. That is why, in the discussions with the leader of Gwynedd County Council and the chief executive of Carmarthenshire County Council, and in
the discussions that Lord Bourne, my fellow Minister in the Wales Office, had yesterday with the chief executive of Ceredigion Council and the vice-chancellor of Aberystwyth University, we were very clear that we do not think that the mid-Wales deal has to be confined to Powys and Ceredigion.

I am sure the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) is aware of examples in Scotland of counties involved in more than one growth deal. We are keen to ensure that if the proposers from mid-Wales say that they want involvement from south Gwynedd—Meirionnydd, for example—Dyffryn Teifi in Carmarthenshire or even north Pembrokeshire, that is something we can look at, because we want to work to deliver the growth deals that are needed in every part of Wales. If people are telling us that the way to do that is to expand or to work as two counties in mid-Wales, we will listen. I am pleased to say in the spirit of co-operation that, over the past few years, the relationship with the Welsh Government Minister for the economy has been extremely constructive.

One thing that has been highlighted in this debate is that we have an east-west issue in relation to economic development. I would argue—perhaps some Opposition Members would agree—that there was perhaps too much emphasis in the early years of devolution on strengthening ties within Wales, which was perfectly understandable. When a new institution is being created for Wales, there needs to be a coherence to Wales. But we also need to recognise the economic realities, including the links between Newport and Bristol, and the cross-border links in north-east Wales. We need to ensure we have a strong Welsh economy that is able to work with our partners in other parts of the United Kingdom.

The hon. Member for Ynys Môn said that Wales is not a peripheral region. I could not agree more. The north Wales growth deal can link to the northern powerhouse and the success stories that are Manchester and Leeds, and a sector deal for the nuclear industry could make a huge difference not just for north-west Wales, but for the entirety of the north Wales economy and the north-west of England. That shows clearly that we are not a peripheral region and that we have a huge contribution to make.

I want to touch quickly on the involvement of universities. The hon. Member for Ceredigion was absolutely right to highlight the importance of universities for economic development. He is fortunate to represent not one but two universities in his constituency. The contribution of Glyndwr University and Bangor University to the north Wales growth deal is an example of what can be done. I was pleased that Lord Bourne met the vice-chancellor of Aberystwyth yesterday, because universities will have a crucial role in any mid-Wales growth deal. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to highlight the importance of the university and further education sector in developing growth deals.

I am aware that time is short, so I will highlight some other issues that were raised in debate. Concerns were raised about broadband connectivity. Listening to the hon. Gentleman, I could be forgiven for thinking that I was listening to his predecessor. Broadband connectivity in Ceredigion is indeed a very serious issue, as it is in many parts of rural Wales, although there are some areas where that is not the case. For example, the connectivity in Aberdaron on the Llyn peninsula, which is much better than the connectivity in the majority of my constituency, is an example of what can be done. Rural Wales can be served if there is a desire to serve rural Wales, but we need some honesty in this Chamber. For broadband connectivity to be supplied across Wales, there has to be a partnership between the private sector, the Welsh Government and the UK Government.

Back in September, I announced the £56 million of addition spending to be made available through the claw-back on the contract with BT, but it is disappointing that that figure was lower than the 11% secured for Wales in 2011 because take-up in Wales had been lower. There has been a lack of transparency in Wales about why and how the priorities for rolling out broadband were set. It is unacceptable that Ceredigion—an area with two universities, which can make such a contribution to our rural economy—has been so ill-served by the way the Welsh Government have rolled out the contract. We can rectify the situation, and we need to do so, but that can be done only if we work together.

I expected that the agricultural sector would be more of a key part of this debate. We understand the importance of the agricultural sector for Ceredigion and most of rural Wales, including Powys. The Government have gone a long way in trying to reassure the sector. First, we guaranteed that the funding will be in place until 2020. We also said that there will be comparable funding until 2022. I hear what the hon. Member for Vale of Clwyd (Chris Ruane) is saying about getting guarantees post-2022, but a funding guarantee until after 2022 would be a longer period of certainty than we would have had if we had decided to remain within the European Union. The farming community appreciates that guarantee.

The hon. Member for Ynys Môn made an important point, which I am happy to accept, about the importance of ensuring that our share of future agricultural funding is based on the historical trend, rather than a Barnett-based system. The Wales Office and Ministers representing Wales in the Wales Office will be making that case, but we have to do so with sensitivity because we cannot say to the Welsh Government, “This is a chunk of money for you, but you must spend it on this specific area.” If we did that, we would be accused of a power grab.

Liz Saville Roberts: Will the Minister give way?

Guto Bebb: I am afraid I cannot take an intervention from the hon. Lady because I am coming to the end of my speech.

This has been a constructive debate and the Wales Office is more than delighted to continue it with hon. Members. Our door is always open. The way we are working in north Wales and the way we have worked with the city deals in south Wales show what can be done when we work together on a cross-party, cross-governmental basis. I want to be part of a success story in mid-Wales to follow on from the success story in north Wales.

5.27 pm

Ben Lake: Thank you for chairing this debate, Mr Hollobone. It has been a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I thank all Members of Parliament—particularly the 10 Welsh Members of Parliament—who attended. That reflects the importance of the rural economy for Members of Parliament from Wales.
I outlined some of the problems facing the future of the rural economy, and we have had a broad discussion about them. We have covered issues relating to what our relationship with the European Union means for our trading arrangements and the future of rural development payments. We also outlined some of the possibilities and opportunities for the rural economy in Wales.

The hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) set out the problem of centralisation and the need for decentralisation. It would send a very strong signal if the UK and Welsh Governments were able to decentralise a lot more of their institutions to rural areas. I am fortunate in Ceredigion to have a Welsh Government building in Aberystwyth, but perhaps there is more we could do to implement that.

Albert Owen: I am glad the hon. Gentleman has highlighted that point. Is he as disappointed as me that the Minister did not refer to that? The Government have responsibility for it, and by keeping agencies open they would help local economies.

Ben Lake: I agree. The Government, and the public sector more broadly, can play a very important role in investing and locating agencies in more rural areas. That would send a signal—a vote of confidence in rural areas—to the private sector that the countryside is open for business, as I said earlier.

I am conscious that time is getting the better of me. We have an opportunity with the growth deal in particular to work on a cross-party basis. This debate has been constructive, which can only be a good thing. We have an opportunity not only to safeguard the current rural economy, but to lay the foundations of the rural economy of tomorrow. Making better use of our higher education institutions and improving connectivity would be a great way to start. Just like decentralising some of the Government agencies, getting the growth deal right would send a clear signal to the outside world—to businesses and entrepreneurs—that the countryside is open for business, and that they should locate their businesses with us. Diolch.

Question put and agreed to.
Resolved.
That this House has considered the future of the rural economy in Wales.

5.30 pm
Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Wednesday 29 November 2017

[STEWART Hosie in the Chair]

Migration Policy and the Economy

9.30 am

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the effect of the Government’s migration policy on the economy.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie, and to see the Minister in her place. We had a crossing of paths in Gloucestershire when she stood as our police and crime commissioner candidate in 2012. She was not successful on that occasion, but Gloucestershire’s loss is very much the House’s and the Home Office’s gain. It is also a pleasure to see the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) here to speak for the Opposition. I will be happy to take interventions from hon. Members and listen to their contributions.

To summarise what I plan to say, my proposition is that migration can be good for Britain if it makes all of us richer, not just the people who have come here to work. It can benefit the public finances and help with the budget deficit, but only if the people coming have sufficient skills and earn a sufficiently high salary. After we have left the European Union, we should treat people who come to Britain from the European Union in the same way as people from elsewhere in the world.

Anything else would be indefensible. The system should be based on people’s skills and what they can contribute to the country, not where they are from. That will also make a tremendous difference to our efforts to strike trade deals around the world. That is the nub of my argument; I will now set it out in more detail.

I will talk primarily about migrants who come here to work or to look for work; I will not cover people who come here seeking refugee status, for family reunion or as students, although I will touch briefly on students towards the close of my remarks. I want to be clear that migrants who come to Britain with the right skills are to be welcomed: they come here, they do valuable jobs and they can benefit our economy as well as themselves. However, we should also consider our primary responsibility to the people who elect us to this place and ensure that our migration system benefits not only the people who come here, but the people who are here already.

When we debate the performance of the economy, the measure that we most commonly look at is the growth of GDP—the size of the economy—which has been positive since the Conservatives came to power soon after the economic crash, but we should also look closely at GDP per head, which is the size of the economy adjusted for the fact that there are more people in Britain. Perhaps that is something the Minister can pass on to colleagues in the Treasury. Of course not all population growth is to do with migration, but according to the Migration Observatory, just over half the population increase between 1992 and 2015 was due to migration. That is quite a significant amount. The rest was to do with things such as the ageing population.

GDP growth per head in the time that we have been in office is about 0.75% per year lower than GDP growth, and over a considerable period that makes a significant difference to how well off we are. We need to ensure that the people coming here contribute to the extent that they are not just making themselves better off, but increasing GDP per head. It is important to make British citizens better off as well.

I want to flag up how migration relates to the conversation we are having about productivity performance, which has been somewhat disappointing since the financial crash. The Chancellor spent a fair bit of time on that in last week’s Budget, which we voted on last night. I do not want to overstate my case, because the academic research shows that there is no single cause of what some of the academic literature calls the “productivity puzzle”. A lot of bright, smart people—far brighter and smarter than me—are not entirely certain what is at the root of it, but I posit that at least one aspect of productivity is to do with migration.

If we say to businesses that there is effectively an unlimited supply of all different sorts of labour that can come from the European Union and that can be hired relatively cheaply, it does not make much sense for those employers to invest significant capital sums in their business for the latest technology and labour-saving innovations that could help their existing workforce to become and stay more productive. If we were to say to employees that after an appropriate adjustment period that unlimited supply of labour from across the European Union will no longer be available, employers would look at investing capital into their businesses and at different and smarter ways to do things that would improve the productivity of their existing workforce. That would make Britain more competitive and deliver the only sustainable way to drive up wages in the public and private sectors: increasing productivity.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Ind): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Harper: I give way first to my hon. Friend for Dover (Charlie Elphicke).

Charlie Elphicke: My right hon. Friend is making a powerful argument. Is not the nub of his case that importing cheap labour from overseas disincentivises businesses from investing not just in kit, but in improving the skills of their employees and our workforce?

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend makes a good point. This is a big issue in his constituency of Dover, one of the gateway parts of our country.

It is perfectly right for us to look at what people can pay; we have rules in Britain about paying the national living wage. However, research done by the Bank of England in its staff working paper, “The impact of immigration on occupational wages: evidence from Britain”, concludes that although there is not an impact at the higher end of the skills spectrum, “in the semi/unskilled services sector...a 10 percentage point rise in the proportion of immigrants is associated with a 2 percent reduction in pay.”

I do not want to overstate it, but there is certainly some evidence that at the bottom end of the labour market, there is an impact on pay. It is also a question of the
availability of labour and saying to employers that they need to think about smarter ways of working, not just assume that they can access an unlimited supply of labour.

James Cartlidge: My right hon. Friend is making a very good speech. On the point of productivity, which he was discussing when my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) and I simultaneously attempted to intervene on him, he will no doubt be as concerned as I am that the productivity figures we have just seen show a heavy concentration of higher productivity in London and the south-east. That suggests to me that the area that has had the highest level of migration and has the highest migration-derived population actually does have high productivity. We have to think about that.

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend makes a good point. The literature shows that many factors contribute to productivity. To digress for the moment on the regional aspect, which is not too far from the main topic, the strongest action the Government should take is to continue to invest in infrastructure across the United Kingdom, particularly transport infrastructure. One of the reasons for the focus of our former colleague George Osborne, when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer, on the northern powerhouse was that if we improved the transport infrastructure to join up the northern cities of England so that people could commute much more quickly between them, we would effectively create a group of cities that together would be globally competitive and would make a real difference to the productivity not just of their region, but of the United Kingdom. Ensuring that we invest in all parts of the United Kingdom and not just in London and the south-east is a valuable point.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): To go back to the right hon. Gentleman’s earlier point, is he aware that he has mis-stated the results of the research on the effect of immigration on wages? In fact, the research to which he refers shows a fall of only 1% in the wages of low-skilled workers as a result of immigration, according to the immigration expert Jonathan Portes. Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that that is the true result of the research that he misquoted?

Mr Harper: No, and I take slight exception to being misrepresented by the hon. and learned Lady. Some people have misquoted the research, but I have been careful to have a copy of the document in front of me and quote exactly from its conclusion without overstating it. I am familiar with Jonathan Portes’ research, but that is different research.

Joanna Cherry: Jonathan Portes is an expert in economic immigration. His commentary on the document states that the actual results suggest a fall of only 1% in the wages of low-skilled workers due to immigration. That is Jonathan Portes’ expert conclusion.

Mr Harper: I am pleased that the hon. and learned Lady has just confirmed that is Jonathan Portes’ opinion about the research.

Joanna Cherry: His expert opinion.

Mr Harper: I was quoting from the document itself; I carefully explained what it was and read out its precise words. What the hon. and learned Lady has done is read out someone’s opinion on it. Jonathan Portes is indeed an economist—in fact, I was debating and disagreeing with him on this very subject on the “Today” programme this morning. Someone may call himself an expert and be an economist, but I suspect everyone here knows that when a number of economists get together, the room ends up with more opinions than economists in it.

Joanna Cherry rose—

Mr Harper: No, I will not give way again yet. I will make some progress.

Much of this debate is about the assumptions behind economic models. Changing the assumptions can often lead to different conclusions. We often hold different views about these things, so we have to make our case with arguments and let our ultimate bosses—the voters—take a view on who they believe. I am content to let them reach that conclusion.

My second point is about migrants’ contribution to the public finances. When we came into office, there was a budget deficit of approximately 10% of GDP, which was completely unsustainable. We have reduced that budget deficit by three quarters, but despite the considerable progress we have made, we still have a fiscal challenge to solve. It is important that we look at the contribution made by those coming here.

The Migration Advisory Committee is an independent, expert committee, so I hope the hon. and learned Lady will listen carefully to what it has to say. It did a very detailed piece of work for the Government in 2011, looking at the minimum income requirement for sponsorship under the family migration route. One of its conclusions from the 2011-12 figures was that a household had to earn £25,700 to make a neutral contribution to the public finances—in other words, for the tax it paid to be sufficient to offset its share of public services such as education, health and defence.

That suggests that the migrant workers in Britain who do not earn significant salaries but have access to benefits such as our welfare system are not making a net contribution to public finances. I am not suggesting that they are not working; they are, but they are earning a lower salary and are therefore entitled to things like in-work tax credits and—as the system changes—universal credit. Lower-paid migrant workers are coming to Britain, working, earning money and paying taxes, but the taxes they pay are not sufficient to contribute properly to public finances. In effect, British citizens and those already working here are subsidising some of these migrant workers.

To come back to our friend Jonathan Portes, on the radio this morning he made the point that if we take all EU migrants together, they do make a positive contribution. I have not checked the figures since I debated him, but I think he is right about that. However, he is musing together all EU migrants of all skill levels. My argument is that we should absolutely continue to have people coming here who are sufficiently highly skilled, are earning income and are making a positive contribution to the public finances, but we should not allow everyone to come here.
Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. Does he accept what a number of employers have told me: that people who may have entered the UK to fill relatively low-skilled and low-paid jobs in shortage occupations develop and progress their skills in the workplace and make a greater contribution over time to the UK economy?

Mr Harper: That may be true, but if the hon. Lady will allow me, I will say more later about what business thinks and about the opportunities that will arise if we make the change I propose. Then, if she does not think I have covered her point, of course she should feel free to intervene.

Charlie Elphicke: My right hon. Friend is being generous in giving way. Will he address ensuring that we can end free movement when we leave the European Union and get the right balance with work permits?

Mr Harper: Yes, I will come to that.

It is worth saying that Britain’s unemployment rate of 4.3% is relatively low, compared with 7.5% in the EU as a whole and 8.9% in the euro area. Some countries in Europe have unemployment rates of more than 20%. Our record is very positive, and businesses have created 3 million new jobs since this Government have been in power. I am always careful to say that businesses have created the jobs, because it does not happen automatically. Although we can help to create the conditions, it is businessmen and businesswomen who actually take the risks and start the businesses. In this country there are still 1.4 million unemployed people, as well as a number of people not in the labour market, to whom we should give opportunities. I think that addresses my hon. Friend’s point.

When we leave the EU in March 2019, we will leave the single market and the customs union, and freedom of movement will end. The Government were absolutely right to make a generous offer to EU nationals already in Britain who came here before we triggered article 50. We were not able to make that offer unilaterally, because we had to ensure that we protected the 1 million British citizens elsewhere in the EU, since the British Government’s first responsibility is to defend the interests of British citizens, wherever they may be in the world. In the Chamber today, we will debate an Opposition day motion from the Scottish National party that we should undertake negotiations, but from the document produced by Michel Barnier’s team, which sets out the British Government’s offer on EU citizens and the demands of the EU27, we can see that we are not a million miles away. There are some issues left that still have to be negotiated on, but on the vast majority there is complete agreement, including residence, exportable benefits and access to the health service. We are within touching distance of reaching a deal on that basis, which will set the mind of many people—EU nationals and British citizens—at rest.

I am also very keen that students keep coming to the United Kingdom to attend our fantastic universities. It is worth mentioning that over the last year the number of international students coming to Britain has increased. Students make very little net impact on the immigration figures because usually they complete their course and then leave; those who want to stay are welcome to do so if they get a graduate-level job, but then they are counted as a worker and not as a student. We have a fantastic offer for international students, including residence, exportable benefits and access to the health service. I look forward to seeing the results of that research.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): My right hon. Friend will know that the University of Gloucestershire has a campus in Cheltenham. Does it not always bear emphasising that our fantastic universities are effectively one of the great exporters in the British economy, because they bring in so much foreign currency? They are one of the jewels in our crown and we should nurture them at every opportunity.

Mr Harper: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend, who is not quite, but almost, my Gloucestershire neighbour, for that intervention. He is absolutely right that we have some fantastic educational institutions. In my constituency, Hartpury College is a provider of both further and higher education. It has international students from around the world, particularly on some of its sport courses, and is a global leader. Those are the sorts of educational opportunities that we should be extending; I want to see that continue, and there is no reason why it should not be able to.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I am not sure where the right hon. Gentleman got his figures from, but the ones that I am looking at are from the Evening Standard. In fact, his former right hon. Friend—the ex-Member for Tatton and former Chancellor—is very worried about the fact that the migration targets include students. He said on 27 August in the Evening Standard, “International student numbers are down by 27,000, because we look like an unwelcoming nation”. I wonder whether the right hon. Gentleman has any comment on that.
Mr Harper: Well, the figures I looked at suggest that is not true. There has been a small reduction in the number of students coming from the European Union, but that has been more than offset by the number of students coming from outside the European Union. Also, the whole issue of whether students are counted in the migration figures or not is a complete red herring. There is no limit on the number of international students who come to Britain. The only things that students have to be able to do is speak English to an appropriate level, be properly qualified for the course they are taking and be able to pay for that course. There is no limit on the number of students coming here.

Of course, what the Government have done over the last seven years is make sure that students are indeed genuine students, and are compliant with our immigration regime. When we came to power, there were tens of thousands of students who were not really students; they were pretending to be students, but they were actually here working. We have removed sponsor licences from, I think, 916 educational institutions, which were bringing in students but were not complying with our immigration rules. That did no one any favours.

We now have an almost entirely compliant system, in which everybody coming here as a student is a genuine student, does their course and, at the end of it, either goes back to their country of origin or, if they have a graduate-level job opportunity, stays and contributes to our country. They are very welcome to do so. If smart, talented students want to come to Britain and study, I welcome them; if they want to stay here afterwards and take a graduate-level job, I welcome them; and if they want to stay here and start up a business, creating wealth and job opportunities for others, I welcome them. We have seen more people doing those things, not fewer, and I hope that trend continues.

We should base our offer to EU nationals post-Brexit on skills. One reason for that is that there are 1.4 million unemployed people in our country, but there are also some people who do not get the opportunities that they ought to get from employers, because employers are sometimes a little too ready to ask people to come from elsewhere in the European Union to work here.

I am thinking about some of the people who need employers to think about them a little more. There are around a million people in the UK on out-of-work benefits who have some kind of mental health problem but are perfectly capable of working, and who would like to work; some, but certainly not all, of them are included in the 1.4 million people who are unemployed. They may need employers to make reasonable adjustments for them, or they may need some support from the excellent Access to Work system that the Department for Work and Pensions has, but they deserve an opportunity to get into the labour market. We should say to employers, "Before you bring someone in from outside the United Kingdom, you should think a little harder about the people we already have here, and ask yourself if you are doing enough to engage them in the labour market." I declare an interest as the chair of the all-party group on learning disability, but there are also around 600,000 people with learning disabilities in the UK who are perfectly capable of working, and who would love nothing more than to enter the workforce. Again, they should be given the opportunity to do so, and we should just challenge employers a little to look at some of the people we have here. I accept they may not be completely job-ready, but I will come back to the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) made about encouraging employers to invest in the skills of employees, so that they get the opportunities to participate. Such encouragement would help enormously.

It is also important that we have an immigration system that commands public support. I was looking at some very interesting work that an organisation called British Future has done. It looked at some of the options that will be in front of us in its report, "Time to get it right: Finding consensus on Britain’s future immigration policy", which was published in September. The report considered whether we should effectively continue to have free movement, whether we should do what I suggest and have a system like the one we have for migration outside the EU, or whether we should have some other system.

Interestingly, British Future did some polling. I always think that we should not make our policies fit polling, but when we have come to the conclusion that we think is right for other reasons, it is quite helpful and heartening, when one looks at what the public’s views are, to find that actually the public are broadly supportive. When I look at the tables about that polling, I see, first of all, that there is a very considerable consensus, and that people think we should not prioritise business and the economy over immigration, or prioritise immigration over the economy, but that we should have a compromise that balances immigration and the economy. That position commanded very significant support from people, whether they were Conservative or Labour supporters, leave or remain, and men or women, which is encouraging.

The report also considers two options for the Government. One is controlling low-skilled immigration through a cap while allowing skilled migrants to come to the UK, as before. Again, that approach has overwhelming support from a whole range of people, whether they were leave or remain, Labour or Conservative, or whatever. The other option is to consider whether we should have different targets for different types of immigration, and that also commands overwhelming support.

Interestingly, particularly for Scottish National party colleagues who are here, the report also put those questions to voters in Scotland and in London. In Scotland, 62% of voters agreed that we should control low-skilled immigration through a cap while allowing skilled migrants to come to the UK as before, which was far more than the proportion of people who wanted to keep free movement—or—at the other extreme—wanted to stop EU migration all together. In London, there was broadly the same figure, with 59% of people wanting to control low-skilled immigration but being very relaxed about higher-skilled migrants, and both those numbers were broadly consistent with those for the UK as a whole.

Joanna Cherry: That is, of course, an opinion poll. Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that the majority of voters in Scotland have voted for political parties that want to keep free movement, and indeed that the Scottish Parliament has recently voted, on a cross-party basis, to support keeping free movement for Scotland and a differential immigration policy for Scotland?
Mr Harper: That may well be true, but of course in the referendum on Scottish independence, when Scotland was asked whether it wanted to remain part of the United Kingdom, it clearly said that it did, and in the EU referendum the United Kingdom, which Scotland is part of, decided that it wanted to leave the European Union, and the single market and free movement of people. The hon. and learned Lady is absolutely right that I am citing an opinion poll; it is an opinion poll that is not only consistent with the result of the EU referendum, but shows very considerable support for the proposition that I am setting out, so I think that my proposition would command widespread consensus.

James Cartlidge: My right hon. Friend is very kind to give way to me a second time. There is one key point I want to raise, because I am not sure whether he will come to it. Were we to bring in such visas or such a system, would he expect that we, our children or whoever would then be subject to similar visas, should we want to visit France or Germany, or work or study in those countries?

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend makes some interesting points. He mushed together several things, including visiting and working. I cannot see any reason why, once we have left the European Union, we would require people coming from the EU for visits—people coming on holiday or for travel—to have visas or vice versa. For example, we do not require visas from citizens of the United States of America coming to Britain on holiday or for visits. It is perfectly reasonable to have rules about people coming to work in Britain, and it would not be unreasonable for European Union countries to have similar rules. We could hardly complain if such rules were reciprocal, but to require visas for visits would not be sensible.

The final point I want to make is about the views of business. It is certainly true—I read the paper that the CBI produced ahead of the debate—that businesses, particularly larger businesses, are basically saying, “We want to carry on importing labour as we do already”, but I think we should push back a little. It is not surprising that businesses want to carry on doing things as they are, with unlimited supplies of inexpensive labour, but we should remind businesses that they should not only do what is in their economic interest, but what is in the economic interest of our country. We should challenge businesses to think about those who are already here and ensure they invest in them and improve their skills. We should also challenge businesses a little about whether they are investing enough in their capital, in the technology available to their business and in their productivity before we automatically say, “Let us just import people from overseas.”

The Home Secretary has commissioned the Migration Advisory Committee to look at the businesses that depend on EU nationals in their workforce, and that work will be helpful. It will enable us to identify those businesses that are using that labour, particularly at the unskilled end of the spectrum, and it will enable the Government to work with those businesses, particularly over the two-year transition period or implementation period, that we have said there will be once we have left the European Union, during which people from the EU will still be able to come here. In that period we will be able to work with business to ensure that they can make the changes they need to make ahead of not having access to the unskilled labour that I talk about in my proposition.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The right hon. Gentleman has been making very broad assumptions about who owns and runs businesses in this country. A great number of my constituents who have been in touch with me on this issue have come from other countries to Scotland to set up and establish businesses, but have found that Home Office rules and processes mean that they are then at risk. They employ people from Glasgow, and their businesses are being put at risk by the Home Office, in particular through delays to entrepreneur visas.

Mr Harper: The hon. Lady makes a good point, which is that we allow and welcome people to come here to set up businesses with appropriate rules about the investment of capital and so on. If she has any specific cases, she should raise those with either the Minister or my colleague the Immigration Minister. I have done that job, and I used to deal with specific cases. The hon. Lady is right: officials, fabulous though they are, are not perfect and mistakes do get made. Part of what we do in this House is fix those mistakes where they happen. We enable Ministers to ensure that systems work more smoothly, and that work is very welcome. She should continue to raise her concerns, as I know she does.

In conclusion, migration can have a positive effect on the economy, but we should look at the growth of our economy per head of population, and not just at GDP growth overall. We have to ensure that the existing population is better off. People coming to the country should earn enough to make a positive contribution to the public finances. That will support the public perception of migration and make people more welcoming. Finally, a migration system based on skills and not the country of origin will be essential for a global Britain that goes out looking for trade deals. It will be very difficult to explain to countries outside the European Union why a citizen of their country with the exact same level of skills finds it more difficult to come to work in Britain than someone from the European Union. Arguably, that would be a discriminatory system that would be difficult to defend once we are no longer a member of the European Union. For all those reasons, I commend my proposition to the House and look forward to the contributions from other Members.

Several hon. Members rose—

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): Order. Before I call the next speaker, I note that five Back Benchers wish to speak. Although I cannot enforce a formal time limit, if they can keep their remarks to around five minutes each, the Front Benchers can start at half-past 10.

10.5 am

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I will pick up exactly where the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) left off in talking about the attitudes of business, and I do so in my capacity as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on migration,
which recently produced a report on the needs of business for access to labour post-Brexit. I have a somewhat shop-soiled copy here that I am happy to share with the Minister.

In the report, we particularly focused on the views and needs of small and medium-sized enterprises. We felt that their voice had not been heard very much in the debate so far. I put on record my thanks to the Migrants Rights Network, which helped with the research, and Ernst and Young, which provided funding, as well as to all the businesses and organisations that provided evidence. We had evidence from 19 organisations and we held oral evidence sessions with businesses and representatives in London and Manchester covering the retail, hospitality, manufacturing and social care sectors, all of which employ a high proportion of EU and European economic area nationals.

The first thing we were told was that the characterisation of jobs as highly skilled or low skilled and the potential over-restriction of inward migration of so-called low-skilled workers was unhelpful. Many jobs that would not be classed as highly skilled under the 2011 definition that currently applies to non-EU and non-EEA nationals require significant skills and experience. It was inferred that that definition might in future apply to EU and EEA nationals. We know from Office for National Statistics data that non-UK nationals are more likely to be in jobs for which they are overqualified than UK nationals. Businesses saw that as potentially having a positive impact. The issue of skills was therefore complex.

Secondly, businesses said that the description, whether implicit or explicit, of some jobs as low-skilled caused an image problem in some sectors, making recruitment in the domestic workforce more difficult, as it made the jobs unattractive. Thirdly, employers found that migrant workers were often more flexible than UK workers. They described them as highly motivated and hard-working. More to the point, migrant workers were more willing and able to move around the country or work more flexible hours, because often they did not have the same family commitments as UK workers. Indeed, ONS stats show that on average EU2 and EU8 nationals work more hours than UK nationals and so supply important and much needed capacity. Finally, the businesses we spoke to were clear that EU free movement has been an important safety valve for employers in accessing the labour they need. That was especially true for SME employers and sectors where recruitment is more difficult.

Given all those factors, the employers who gave evidence to our inquiry were concerned that immigration policy post-Brexit should not inhibit their access to the labour they need. That concern has been echoed by businesses across all sectors in my constituency, from food processing to paper-making to construction. Flexibility is especially important. In some cases, the need for labour is seasonal, as the Minister knows. Some businesses need to be able to move workers from site to site, depending on where the work arises. I mentioned this in an intervention on the right hon. Gentleman, but employers also spoke about the need for flexibility to enable lower skilled workers to progress and develop higher skills as they progressively acquire experience and knowledge. That flexibility is important in terms of the productivity and progress of the business.

In our inquiry, we asked employers about their preferred model for management of migration post-Brexit. They cautioned against introducing a points-based system similar to the system that applies to non-EU and non-EEA nationals, expressing concern about the cost to employers, the complexity of the system and the bureaucracy. They were worried that such a system would not only limit the number of workers who could come to the UK, but inhibit the flexibility business needed. They were particularly anxious to ensure that any system did not impose unnecessary administrative burdens on employers. They suggested that work needed to be done to identify sectors that were likely to face acute labour shortages in certain skillsets when we can no longer freely access EU labour, and that the shortage occupation list should be expanded if necessary to reflect the new shortages.

The hon. Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke), who has not been able to stay for this part of the debate, rightly spoke about the need to upskill the domestic workforce. The businesses we spoke to favoured more emphasis on training and upskilling of domestic workers and potential workers, although they also said they thought the existing apprenticeship and training schemes were too inflexible, especially for small and medium-sized businesses. They suggested that as part of the post-EU immigration strategy, the Government need to look at developing apprenticeship schemes that more effectively address the labour needs of small businesses. They also asked for Government to provide support for positive efforts in sectors that are considered, often wrongly, to be unskilled and to build a public relations campaign to promote the attractions of working in those sectors. They highlighted in particular the hospitality, food, retail and social care sectors.

I hope the report will be helpful to the Minister in formulating post-Brexit migration policy. The APPG has already had the opportunity to meet the Migration Advisory Committee to discuss our findings. I am concerned that the MAC report commissioned by the Home Secretary will not be with us until later next year. I anticipate that the Government intend to introduce their immigration Bill rather sooner than that, and so will not have the benefit of the MAC research in preparing it. I hope the Minister will say how engagement with business, especially SMEs, will take place in anticipation of the introduction of the legislation to ensure their needs are fully reflected in it.

Finally, we should also be aware that restricting immigration will create other additional and new pressures. We will increasingly have an ageing settled population and a proportionately smaller working-age population; that will lead both to increased demand for labour to care for the ageing population, and to pressures on the supply of labour. As the recent report by the Institute for Public Policy Research shows, that will potentially have a negative impact on tax revenues. We must not forget the benefits of immigration. As the APPG’s report makes clear, the flexibility, innovation, commitment and ready availability of migrant labour has benefited business and our economy, and it must continue to do so post-Brexit.

10.12 am

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I am thrice blessed—to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Hosie; to follow the hon. Member for Stretford
and Urmston (Kate Green), who made some excellent points; and for the first time to attend a debate to which my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins) will respond as Minister. We congratulate her as the first member of our intake in 2015 to have a red box. I am sure she will do the Home Office proud.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) on securing the debate. I mean that sincerely, because it is extraordinary how immigration has come to dominate so profoundly the referendum campaign but has been barely debated in Parliament since, so I very much welcome this debate. I did not know what the essence of his argument would be, but I have to say I fundamentally disagree with one point that is extremely important and we need to reflect upon it: the point about discrimination and the two different systems that I think will eventually become far more important than perhaps many people realise.

My right hon. Friend is right to say we have a discriminatory system. In fact, the official Leave campaign vowed to end that system. Under our system a person can enter the country to work as an unskilled migrant only from the EU; it is illegal to do so from outside the EU. Tier 3, a form of non-EU migration, is closed and has been for many years. In a written answer, Jacqui Smith said it was because we get sufficient unskilled labour from the EU. The key word is “unskilled”. Some 75% of people who come from the EU to work in this country would not even be able to get into the country were we to reform the system as suggested. The problem is that the jobs are not menial and unskilled.

I will give the example of a firm in my constituency. Challs, based in Hadleigh, is a chemical manufacturer that exports around the world. It is ambitious, but its owner has said there is a real problem: he has key members of staff who are EEA nationals who are classed as unskilled under the non-EU system, but they are not unskilled and his company depends on them and he would not be able to recruit replacements; it is simply not feasible. We have a significant issue here. I campaigned to remain, but I think the referendum result was driven Quite legitimately — by a concern about unsustainable levels of migration. To honour the referendum result, it is necessary not only to bring about control of immigration, but to reduce the numbers to a sustainable level in the long term.

We have to remember that in the last quarter non-EU net migration was 50,000 higher than EU net migration. If we have a single non-discriminatory system—the same system for EU and non-EU—it is mathematically impossible that non-EU migration will do anything other than rise, perhaps significantly. On the streets of Clacton and other places where the people voted leave in overwhelming numbers, if we had said that a direct result of leaving the EU will be a significant rise in non-EU migration, they would have been shocked and appalled. That is a democratic point that we have to consider. I am a strong supporter of immigration, but it has to be controlled. Consider the people from eastern Europe and the impact they have had: they had acentury of brutalisation, but we set them free in 1989; they came into the single market that Mrs Thatcher created and they have worked their socks off in this country.

How do our recycling centres keep going? Almost entirely from east European labour. This is the key point. Would we fill jobs? It is not about what skills are available. It is simply whether we have people available to do those jobs, and people with the will to do those jobs. I agree strongly with my right hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston that we have to train our own workforce to fill those positions, but it will take time. I remember representatives of the hospitality sector coming to speak to the Work and Pensions Committee when I was on it before the election. They said they supported a greater proportion of workers coming from the UK, but there would need to be a transition.

When I stay overnight in the Park Plaza, I do not see a single British member of staff. They are all from Europe and they work their socks off. They might be unskilled and low paid, but we and our economy depend on them. We have to move away from that dependency, which has become damaging. That is the reality of the position we are in now, so we must be very cautious before equalising the system. In my view, for what it is worth, were we to maintain some form of membership of the EEA and have some form of emergency brake on European migration, such as Liechtenstein has through the European Free Trade Association, and were we maintain the division we have where we are strict on non-EU numbers, we might get a better system, because instead of the Migration Advisory Committee determining the number of people coming into the country, it would be a different system altogether called the free market, which I support. We should be very cautious before changing that.

10.17 am

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is wonderful to see you in the Chair, Mr Hosie. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) on securing this debate. I very much welcome the opportunity to speak about the positive contribution that migration makes to the economy, particularly in Scotland. As you might expect from an SNP MP, Mr Hosie, I will focus my remarks today on this Government’s obsession with an unrealistic and counterproductive one-size-fits-all net migration target, which I believe is deeply flawed in economic terms.

It is important to set the scene and provide a bit of context for this debate. Scotland’s estimated population was 5.4 million in mid-2016—the highest on record and an increase of 6.7% since 2001. Net migration has contributed to a population increase every year for the past 16 years. In contrast, the rate of natural change has remained low for the past 50 years, and over the past two years has been negative. That contrasts with the situation in the UK, where natural change contributes significantly more to population increase. Migration has therefore been critical to growing Scotland’s population, and any reduction in migration has the potential to seriously damage Scotland’s demographic resilience.

Looking ahead, Scotland’s population is projected to increase by 5% by 2041, driven solely by migration. Scotland has a markedly different demographic profile from the rest of the UK, which is why I believe immigration policy should be devolved to the Scottish Parliament, a topic I will return to later. If current trends continue, net inward migration is projected to be the sole contributor
to Scotland’s population growth. EU migrants make an enormous contribution to our economy in Scotland, so I am especially fearful about the consequences of restricting free movement in a post-Brexit Britain.

I was recently out in Glasgow enjoying a dinner and was struck that from the moment I entered the hotel to the moment I left, every single member of staff I came across was a European national. That echoes the point made by the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) only a few moments ago. The reality is that our tourism sector is heavily and increasingly dependent on workers from other EU countries. According to the annual population survey, in 2016 there were approximately 17,000 EU citizens working in tourism in Scotland, representing 9.4% of all those working in the sector overall, with that share rising to 15.3% in the accommodation sector specifically. That compares to an EU citizens’ employment share of 5% in the Scottish economy as a whole.

We know that the UK Government’s position on EU citizens in the Brexit process is already having a detrimental impact on flows of inward migration. For example, the number of nurses from the European Union registering to work in the UK has fallen by 96% since the Brexit vote last year. Figures collated by the Nursing and Midwifery Council show that the number of new applicants from the EU fell from 1,304 in July last year to just 46 in April. If that does not cause us concern, I do not know what will.

Mr Harper: I was trying not to intervene because I did speak for a fair length of time, but just to be clear: there are more EU nationals working in the NHS this year than last year. There were 61,891 EU nationals working in the NHS in June 2017, compared with 58,698 in June 2016. The idea that after the referendum decision all the EU nationals working in the NHS went away is simply not true.

David Linden: Those figures will presumably include doctors; the figures that I quoted are from the Nursing and Midwifery Council. If the right hon. Gentleman wants to conflate the figures, that is absolutely fine, but that is where my figures are from.

Restrictions on migration will also have an impact on Scotland’s soft fruits sector—a vital part of our rural economy. That impact will be of interest to you, Mr Hosie, and to the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair), who I presume will speak about it as well. It is vital that our sectors retain the ability to recruit staff from across the EU. We know that 15,000 non-UK seasonal workers are employed in our soft fruit and vegetable sector, so that should be a cause for concern as we approach leaving the EU.

Before summing up, I want to focus on calls—not from the Scottish National party, but from civic Scotland—for immigration powers to be devolved. We know that the one-size-fits-all approach to which the Government are wedded will not work for the future sustainability of our economy.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): There have been a number of suggestions about having a separate immigration policy for Scotland and England, but there is of course no border there. Countries like Australia, for example, have separate states with separate immigration policies. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that creates issues, with leaks of migrants across the states?

David Linden: Given the mess that the United Kingdom Government are currently in regarding the situation in Ireland, I am not sure that a Member from the governing party lecturing us on borders necessarily suggests the right frame of mind at the moment.

The calls for immigration to be devolved do not necessarily come from the SNP, although we support them; they come from civic Scotland. Let me quote Grahame Smith, head of the Scottish Trade Union Congress, who I believe was right to say:

“We believe migration has an entirely positive contribution to make to Scotland’s economy, demography and culture, particularly in a properly regulated labour market in which workers’ rights are protected.”

He went on to say:

“UK immigration policy is increasingly encroaching on the devolved powers of the Scottish parliament, including how it runs its public services and who works within it.”

Grahame Smith is right: immigration powers must be devolved to the Scottish Parliament. We in the SNP believe that migration is about more than economics. It is about individuals and their families having the right to choose to build their lives in Scotland. It is about the contribution that they make to our culture, communities and society, as neighbours, friends, family members, and work colleagues. That contribution will be lost if people from the EU are no longer able to come here.

10.23 am

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) for introducing such an important debate on the future of migration after Brexit.

Since being elected, I have heard concerns specifically from soft fruit farmers across my constituency about how we will continue to provide for seasonal agricultural labour after we depart from the European Union. In Angus, we produce over 30% of Scotland’s soft fruit, and I am incredibly proud of my many constituents who collectively deliver such a significant contribution to our vital food and drink sector. As I set out in my submission to the Migration Advisory Committee last month, Angus requires an excess of 4,000 seasonal workers every year to make that vital contribution to our economy. I will continue to urge the UK Government to provide clarity on how they will field those much-needed staff going forward.

Labour accounts for approximately 50% of a soft fruit farm’s costs. If there are further declines in the numbers returning to the United Kingdom, overtime payments will be essential to cover the hours of work required to complete the production process. I am deeply concerned that those higher wage overheads will put pressure on the price for our consumers. If the cost of our fruit increases, I am anxious about not only competitiveness with outside markets, but the possible implications for the ability of consumers to afford our produce.
Many colleagues on both sides of the House will have similar issues in their constituencies; I hope that they, too, take this opportunity to work constructively with the Brexit process, rather than heckle from the sidelines. I know that behind the scenes there is a power of work is going on in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Home Office to ensure a viable solution after Brexit, but I hope that the Minister can give some reassurance to my constituents that they will be told how they can continue to grow their great British businesses as we depart the EU, sooner rather than later.

10.25 am

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie, and to see the two rapid-risers of 2015 and 2017 on the Front Benches. I want to touch on three separate issues, the last of which has already been extensively discussed: curry, students and fruit-picking. The metric I want to use is how much those sectors contribute to our economy, through productivity and other means.

Let us start with curry. I am a product of that industry as my father had two Indian restaurants. It was the late Robin Cook who said that chicken tikka masala is now the national dish, not fish and chips. Chinese and Indian restaurants combined contribute £5.5 billion to our economy—employing 250,000 people—but since the Government started meddling with the tier 2 visas, we hear that two Indian restaurants a week are closing in this country. That is on the eve of small business Saturday.

In all three areas, there is a theme: a dogmatic target—tens of thousands, just for the sake of it—can lead to skills shortages and gaps in our labour force that need to be addressed. If we are wedded to that ridiculous target, we have no room for manoeuvre. I think the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel), who said that if we stop EU migration, the curry chefs will be welcomed in with open arms. I remember querying that in Home Office questions, during my brief time at the Dispatch Box. I was told, “No—the target remains the tens of thousands.” The curry industry was hoodwinked, which was really unhelpful, and now feels very cheated.

It is time to get rid of the arbitrary target altogether, but students should certainly be taken out of migration figures. The general public at large do not see them as immigrants, because they are here temporarily; I think Home Office figures show that 97% of them go back after their studies. They contribute £10 billion per year to our economy and this is a huge export industry. There are many advantages to having students, such as the contribution they make to our soft power, and to having international staffers come to our universities, including the University of West London in my constituency.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dr Huq: I am sorry; I would have done so earlier, but I have only one minute left to conclude.

Hon. Members have already mentioned fruit-picking. We need a stable and predictable flow of people to stop our fruit, hops and vegetables rotting away in the fields. The National Farmers Union—not the Socialist Workers party—has said that there is an urgent labour crisis in that sector. We had that workers’ scheme from 1948 to 2013. The agriculture industry is worth £3 billion to the UK, and it relies on a seasonal workforce. As the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) said, indigenous people do not want to do that work—that is why it is not happening. I would urge the Minister to reintroduce that kind of scheme. There are academic studies from the University of Sussex, but again we see dogma trumping reason, with a counterproductive result. Attracting Brits is difficult.

The right hon. Member for Forest of Dean mentioned settled status. Members of the 3 million campaign—my constituent Wiktor Moszczyński is very vocal in that—do not like what they are being offered. They think it is a lesser status and a secondary tier. They have lost their rights to family reunification, appeal rights, protection from deportation—the list goes on. It is seen as not really satisfactory.

We need some flexibility. The fixed target is unmet, unachievable and unrealistic. George Osborne says: “Advanced nations that have shut the door to newcomers now find themselves ageing fast and shrinking as a presence in global affairs—whereas those with open societies maintain a big role in shaping the world we live in.”

I did not used to agree with him when he was in here, but I agree a lot more with him now he is out at the Evening Standard. I will end there!

10.31 am

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): It is a great pleasure to welcome you to the chair and to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. It is also a pleasure to welcome the Minister to her place. We may disagree about politics, but I have always found her unerringly professional and courteous in her approach.

We have had a very interesting debate today, but these debates should be evidence-based. I want to start by taking the opportunity to correct for the record what was said by the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) on Sir Stephen Nickell’s research. I quote from an article published in The Independent on 25 January 2017 following an interview with Sir Stephen Nickell, where he said that his work had been misrepresented by those who wished to slash immigration:
"The author of an influential piece of economic research frequently heralded by leading Brexiteers as evidence that immigration from the European Union undermines native British wages has stressed that the negative impact is ‘infinitesimally small’ and that his findings had been widely misrepresented."

Sir Stephen’s research, originally published in December 2015, is frequently cited by those who are “asked to provide evidence that immigration has had a negative effect on living standards” in the United Kingdom, yet “the 10 per cent claim was based on a significant misunderstanding of the research’s findings. As...Jonathan Portes has pointed out, the actual results suggested only a 1 per cent fall in the wages of low-skilled workers due to immigration—and this impact was spread over a period of eight years.” That is 1% spread over eight years.

Sir Stephen said that his research had been “grossly misrepresented”, that the wage impact is “very small” and that low-skilled workers “lose out by an infinitesimally small amount.” He said that he was cross that he had not been able to get cross in public about the “public bowdlerisation of his research findings” because he was a senior official at the Office for Budget Responsibility until recently, and added that “his co-author, Ms Saleheen, who works at the Bank of England, has also been unable to speak out publicly to correct misleading statements.”

I am pleased to quote from the horse’s mouth—the author of the research—that the research has been misrepresented, and from Jonathan Portes, who is not a self-appointed expert, but a professor of economics and a widely recognised expert on immigration.

Mr Harper: I was very clear in what I said. I agree with the hon. and learned Lady—I do understand that some people have misrepresented what Professor Nickell said. I read from the conclusion of the report, which said that the 10% increase in the proportion of labour led to a 2% reduction in wages. I did not overstate it. I do understand that some people have exaggerated that, and I was very careful not to do so, because I take what economists say seriously.

Joanna Cherry: I hear what the right hon. Gentleman says and I am happy to have had the opportunity to clarify the matter.

What I really want to speak about is the evidence of the impact of immigration on the Scottish economy. It is increasingly clear that UK immigration policy does not and cannot address the demographic and social needs of Scotland. If that continues to be the case, the Scottish economy will be adversely affected. The contribution of citizens from the European Economic Area to Scotland has recently been addressed in detail, with substantial evidential analysis, by the Scottish Government, in their response to the Migration Advisory Committee’s call for evidence on the role of EEA workers in the UK labour market. I commend that to the Minister. It shows that EU migration in Scotland is essential to ensure sustainable population growth, which is the single biggest driver of our economic growth.

All the projected increases in Scotland’s population over the next 10 years are projected to come from migration, in contrast with the UK as a whole, where only 54% of population increase is expected to come from overseas migration. That is why Scotland needs a different immigration policy and why the Scottish Parliament has voted to support the Scottish Government’s policy of a differential immigration policy, although it is a matter of regret that the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats did not support that. I am very pleased to say that the Labour party and the Greens did.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) said, the Scottish Government also have the support of the Scottish Trades Union Congress. In particular, Unison has spoken out strongly about the need for a differential immigration policy for Scotland. I am also pleased to say that the Scottish Chambers of Commerce and the Scottish Institute of Directors have said that Scotland should look closely at a differential immigration policy.

To address the point about borders raised by the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair), Australia and Canada are two examples of countries that operate differential immigration systems. As the hon. Lady ought to know, because it is her Government’s policy, immigration is not controlled so much at borders these days but in the workplace, when people go to look for a job or a benefit, or go to rent a flat. In Scotland, we now have a separate national insurance code, so it would be easy for Scotland to have a differential immigration system from England without any need for a hard border. Indeed, we are repeatedly told by the UK Government that the Republic of Ireland can have a separate immigration policy from the north of Ireland without the need for a hard border.

I am constrained by time, but I want to look briefly at the macroeconomic modelling that has been done by the Scottish Government, because it shows the contribution of EU migrants to the Scottish economy: on average, each additional EU citizen working in Scotland contributes approximately £4.42 billion per year to the Scottish Government, because it shows the contribution of EU migrants to the Scottish economy: on average, each additional EU citizen working in Scotland contributes approximately £4.42 billion per year to the Scottish economy.

To address the point about borders raised by the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair), Australia and Canada are two examples of countries that operate differential immigration systems. As the hon. Lady ought to know, because it is her Government’s policy, immigration is not controlled so much at borders these days but in the workplace, when people go to look for a job or a benefit, or go to rent a flat. In Scotland, we now have a separate national insurance code, so it would be easy for Scotland to have a differential immigration system from England without any need for a hard border. Indeed, we are repeatedly told by the UK Government that the Republic of Ireland can have a separate immigration policy from the north of Ireland without the need for a hard border.

I am constrained by time, but I want to look briefly at the macroeconomic modelling that has been done by the Scottish Government, because it shows the contribution of EU migrants to the Scottish economy: on average, each additional EU citizen working in Scotland contributes approximately £4.42 billion per year to the Scottish economy. It is also estimated that, fiscally, they contribute £10,400 per head in Government revenue. So, the evidence shows that EU and EEA migrants are making a huge contribution to the Scottish economy.

With regard to migration from outside the EU, we do not think a one-size-fits-all approach applies either. We would like the UK Government to abolish their net migration target, which, let’s face it, they have missed for the past seven or eight years, so there is not really much point in it anyway. We would like them to abolish the immigration skills charge. We would like a more flexible and responsive approach to the existing mechanism of the shortage occupation list for Scotland, and most importantly—this has cross-party support from every single political party in Scotland—we want the post-study work visa introduced in Scotland. I would really like the Minister to tell us why the post-study work visa has not been reintroduced in Scotland, despite the support of her own party in Scotland for that to happen. We are often told how tremendously influential the Scottish Conservatives are now at Westminster. If that is so, let
Afzal Khan: I thank the hon. Lady for that contribution.

Let me make progress on my point. Those students would have supported about 24,000 jobs and brought £920 million-worth of positive economic impact to those universities and their local economies—50% of the jobs would have been in the local economies and 50% in the universities. International students pay higher fees and subsidise UK higher education spending. Students not only benefit local economies but have a lasting impact on our links with other countries. They increase our soft power abroad: 55 world leaders from 51 countries have studied in the UK.

Research is a major reason why the UK is attractive to investors. International students go on to fuel innovation and research. I am from Manchester, and graphene—a wonder material—was discovered at Manchester University. The two professors who discovered it were migrants. They won Nobel prizes, and we will continue benefiting economically from their discoveries. International students have also been shown to benefit the UK students who study alongside them.

Despite all those benefits, the Government made it more difficult for students to get visas, which discourages them from staying in the UK. The Government have chosen their misguided net migration targets over the benefits students bring to local economies. Their approach to EU nationals is already making skills and labour shortages worse. The NHS, nursing and social care are being hit. Those sectors face a crisis. The Government have used EU citizens as bargaining chips in negotiating with the EU. EU citizens are still waiting for clarity about their rights 18 months after the EU referendum. The number of EU nurses registering to work in the UK dropped by 96% in the year since the Brexit vote, and staff shortages in social care are causing homes across the country to close.

This issue does not just affect the public sector. The Confederation of British Industry, the Institute of Directors and the British Chambers of Commerce have all said that we will need more migrant workers, skilled and unskilled, in the years ahead. Despite the rhetoric that immigration policy will attract the brightest and best, we are losing out on skilled workers. The Government’s distinction between skilled and unskilled workers makes no sense. Apparently, to be a skilled worker, a person must earn at least £35,000 a year, but people in a number of skilled occupations earn less than that, including non-medical nurses, many teachers, language teachers and engineers. Outside London, many people earn less than £35,000. A tech genius in Manchester is likely to earn less than she would in London, but that does not mean she is any less skilled.

The Government asked the Migration Advisory Committee to investigate immigration policy and our economy, but it seems that the Government will publish the immigration Bill before the Committee publishes its advice. What could be a clearer sign that immigration policy is not guided by economics? The Government are already planning to ignore the advice they requested.

When the Government draft the immigration Bill, will they ask businesses what they need, and will they seek input from unions? Will they examine the impact that their own austerity policies have had on access to the NHS, schools, housing and public services? Will they take account of the fact that the Migration Advisory
Committee missed the nursing shortage altogether, and that it was the Secretary of State for Health who had to lift the visa restriction for nurses?

Labour has promised fair and reasonable management of migration. We will always put economic prosperity first. We will scrap the meaningless and unworkable migration target, which has never once been met in seven years. The reality is that the target for non-EU migration alone, which the Government are solely in charge of, has never once been met. Labour would not include international students in the immigration numbers. We will work with employers, unions and others to establish our real needs and meet them. We want fairness between EU and non-EU migrants. That means levelling up decent treatment and establishing fair rules. We will crack down on all exploitative employers who deny rights and breach national minimum wage rules. Migrants make a great contribution to this country, to our social and cultural life, and to our economy. Tory rules are an obstacle to maximising those benefits.

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Gentleman has pre-empted me; I was going to deal with that at the end, but I will deal with it now. We have no plans to reintroduce the post-study work visa. The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) was quite right to talk about evidence, and I thank her for her kind comments, but evidence from previous schemes showed that large numbers of people were undertaking low-skilled work. We now have the much more targeted tier 2 scheme, so that when graduates leave UK universities we know that they go into highly skilled jobs, using the skills that they have developed at university. Indeed, the evidence goes even further: we found that in October 2010, three in five users of the post-study work visa were in unskilled work. A 2014 analysis of migrants who had switched from the tier 1 post-study work category to the tier 1 entrepreneurial category found that the majority had no declared economic activity or were working in breach of their conditions of stay. That is why we are focusing on skills and productivity—precisely because we hope that students who come to our universities will deliver those skills and will be able to contribute.

I am conscious of time, so I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to this debate and I reassure them that the Government are clear that carefully controlled economic migration benefits our economy. It is vital for our country’s prosperity that we select and attract the right mix of skills to the UK, ensuring that we continue to support wealth creation, employment and productivity. We know that migration supports United Kingdom growth by allowing employers greater choice and enhancing the labour market’s ability to respond quickly to capacity constraints. I listened carefully to the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) on the concerns of local employers. I hope that the independent Migration Advisory Committee report will draw on those views, so that in September 2018 we will have an evidenced-based report on what our migration system should look like.

Migrants do not just bring the skills needed but enhance our society and contribute to British life. However, we must strike a balance. We need to attract migrant labour, which boosts our economy, while ensuring that migration does not reach unmanageable levels to the detriment of domestic labour, skills and local communities. Our commitment to reducing net migration to sustainable levels must be balanced by our determination to ensure that UK businesses have the labour force that they need. Our immigration system must strike that balance.

I was most interested to hear the speech of the hon. Member for Streford and Urmston (Kate Green), particularly as she is the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on migration. She mentioned skills; in setting in particularly when it comes to drawing up the shortage occupation list. Again, we will look at the evidence of the committee’s report in September 2018.

The hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) and the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West both mentioned Scotland having its own immigration system. I make the simple point that the United Kingdom is united: there is free movement between England, Wales and Scotland. The whole point of
having a united immigration policy is to keep our kingdom united. I know that that does not play with the views of the—

Joanna Cherry: Will the Minister give way?

Victoria Atkins: Will the hon. and learned Lady forgive me if I do not, as I know that my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean wants to speak for two minutes at the end? I just wanted to make the point that we have freedom of movement in the United Kingdom.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) for raising the issue of agricultural workers. That is being kept under review, and the Immigration Minister is visiting many members of the agricultural sector to discuss those concerns. We note in passing that the latest labour market statistics from the Office for National Statistics show that more EU nationals are coming to this country to work than ever before. That is why we have not implemented a seasonal agricultural workers scheme, but that is kept under review and we will listen carefully to the National Farmers Union and others.

The hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) mentioned curry, students and fruit picking. We have already dealt with fruit picking, but I am delighted that she raised the subject of curry. Curry chefs are not subject to the freedom of movement rules that EU chefs enjoy. We do not want to discriminate between non-EU and EU migrants. There will be a system for all our international partners. I make no promises as to how that will impact curry chefs in particular, but the point is that we will be free of that current difference between EU and non-EU citizens because we are leaving the European Union.

The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West spoke about the post-study work visa issue; I have already answered that point by way of an intervention. We continue to review our immigration arrangements regularly, and we are committed to ensuring that the system continues to serve the national interest.

Very quickly, on the point about the immigration Bill and rules, which was raised by a number of hon. Members, the MAC report is due to report in September 2018. The immigration Bill will be drafted before then; it will be about dealing with the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill repealing freedom of movement. The detail of EU migration policy that will apply to EU nationals will be set out in immigration rules. The report is a very important part of creating those rules. I hope that the Bill will come next year; it will set out the framework within which those rules will work.

Mr Hosie, I want to give my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean time to make his closing remarks. It has been a pleasure to listen to this debate and to the informative contributions; they have made for a very interesting morning. Allow me to finish with this thought: we all know that successful businesses are essential to the success of our economy. It is through successful businesses that we have employment, pay packets and prosperity, which is precisely why the Government established its immigration policy, and measures such as its modern industrial strategy and flexible working arrangements, through universal credit for example. I hope that that will have an impact on bringing people into the job market. All those policies draw together to try to ensure that the United Kingdom remains a great place to do business. We welcome the contribution that migrants have made historically, and will make in future.

10.58 am

Mr Harper: I am grateful for the opportunity to sum up the debate. To come back to what my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) said, part of the reason for this debate was to kick off the discussion. I am grateful for the views that colleagues have given. I am very conscious that all the debate about migration so far has been about the existing EU nationals in Britain and our British citizens overseas. That is very important, but it has rather obscured the question of what we will do after we leave the European Union. That is exactly why I called this debate. Clearly, it will not be the last debate, but the first in a series. It has brought out some of the issues and has enabled us to have discussion. What has come through very clearly—this is supported by the polling that I quoted from British Future—is that the public want us to balance the needs of the economy and the requirement to control migration. They do not want us to prioritise one issue over the other; they want to balance them, and getting that balance right is important.

I have set out a proposition, and the Minister can listen to that. The Migration Advisory Committee is doing work to inform the debate, and colleagues on both sides of the House and from all parts of the United Kingdom will bring valuable insight. That was my intention. We have had an excellent debate, with contributions from many parts of the United Kingdom and from both Front Benches, and I am grateful for those. I am sure that this will not be the last time that we debate this important subject, and it was a great pleasure to do so under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the effect of the Government’s migration policy on the economy.
Arctic Ambassador: Appointment

I beg to move, That this House has considered the appointment of an Arctic ambassador.

That this House has considered the appointment of an Arctic ambassador.

It is an immense pleasure—indeed, an honour—to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I welcome the Minister. He indicated that this might be his first Westminster Hall debate in his present post, so I congratulate him on that.

I am delighted to introduce this debate on an issue that is close to my heart. Scotland is the Arctic’s closest neighbour, and the potential for collaboration and mutual learning between us is significant. That is why I have championed closer political engagement with the Arctic countries for some time. As a member of the all-party parliamentary group on polar regions, I want to take this opportunity to credit the APPG for its work in this regard.

Douglas Chapman: The chairman of the APPG makes a valid point. However, as I will reveal, the proximity of the Arctic to Scotland makes Arctic issues much more relevant to our Government in Edinburgh and to our interests. I recognise, however, that the Antarctic plays a significant role overall and has similar issues, especially with regard to climate change and the environment, as the hon. Gentleman alludes to.

I thank Members who supported my recent early-day motion calling for the UK Government to appoint an Arctic ambassador. The reasons for my pursuit of this matter are manifold. Climate change is one of the greatest threats we face. As we know, its impact is felt most keenly in the Arctic north, where the melting of sea ice is accelerating at an alarming rate. In summer 2016, we saw the second lowest minimum ice extent on record in the Arctic ocean. The melt season has been lengthening, too. For example, the duration of ice-free conditions between the East Siberian sea and the western Beaufort sea increased by nearly three months between 1979 and 2012.

We must not underestimate the impact of what is happening in the High North and its inevitable effects on the rest of the world. Geographically, Scotland is the Arctic’s closest non-Arctic neighbour; the northermmost part of Scotland is closer to the Arctic than to London. I was delighted to be able to attend the Arctic Circle forum last week in Edinburgh, which was co-hosted by the Scottish Government. The forum served as a platform to spell out the plethora of ways in which Scotland can work with our Arctic partners for mutual benefit. Our geographical similarities and our shared challenges in areas such as the environment, living in remote communities, fisheries, planning and tourism were all brought to the fore. We also share many cultural and historical ties.

For example, the twinning arrangement between my home town, Dunfermline, and Trondheim in Norway was the first in Europe. Our links go back a long way.

I will focus on the following areas of mutual interest between us and our Arctic neighbours, although this list is far from exhaustive: energy, transport, tourism, design and innovation, and defence. Energy is an area in which Scots have much to offer. The development of renewable energy in Scotland is forging ahead, and the capacity of renewables is set to increase. The world’s first ever floating wind farm was recently launched in Scotland, demonstrating our innovative approach to renewables on a global stage. At the Arctic Circle forum last week, we heard from Neil Kermode, managing director of the European Marine Energy Centre, who recounted Orkney’s renewables success story. Those islands have been producing more than 100% of their energy from renewables since 2013, and one household in 10 generates its own power.

Joanna Cherry: Will my hon. Friend join me in acknowledging the fantastic contribution from Heriot-Watt University in my constituency to the development of renewable technology in the Orkney Islands?

Douglas Chapman: Exactly; I thank my hon. and learned Friend for that intervention. I will mention later the collaboration that we seek with all academic institutions. All the universities in Scotland were represented at the conference last week.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Given that the majority of policy areas related to the Arctic and the High North, and to the boundaries with the United Kingdom, are predominantly devolved to our Parliament in Holyrood, does my hon. Friend agree that there needs to be more joint work and collaboration, and that the United Kingdom Government need to recognise the expertise in Holyrood and in the Scottish Government?

Douglas Chapman: My hon. Friend makes a really valid point. During the independence referendum, Scotland was asked to lead the UK, not leave the UK. That kind of argument makes it important that Scotland’s position and expertise, and the valuable contribution we can make to Arctic issues, are brought to the fore.

Orkney also has the highest uptake of electric cars in the UK. There are clearly lessons to be learned across borders in a region with some of the greatest potential for renewable energy in the world.

Although we are making huge leaps in harnessing wind and tidal power in Scotland, we still mainly use fossil fuels to heat our homes and businesses. Many other, more niche renewable energy sources, such as geothermal, can be exploited. Geothermal energy is already being used to heat homes in parts of Glasgow, which begs the question, how can that be expanded to other areas? That takes me to Iceland, which is a world leader in geothermal power. Where better than our near neighbours to seek guidance on further developing that form of energy in Scotland?

As sea ice coverage in the Arctic reduces, opportunities might open up for new global trade shipping routes, and those could be supported by Scottish ports. The Northern Isles, the Western Isles, the Moray firth and
We must ensure that all our resources are protected so that they can continue to be enjoyed by Scots and visitors alike. That is why the Scottish tourism agency signed a memorandum of understanding with Iceland’s tourism board last year. There is room for wider collaboration across the Arctic region on marine and coastal tourism. It is in our stewardship and sometimes our care for sensitive areas that Scotland can influence others.

An area of a mutual interest between the UK and the Arctic that does not spring immediately to mind is social policy. That said, I was hugely impressed by the Arctic conference and the innovative ways in which some speakers identified collaborative approaches towards things such as health, housing and planning. I was blown away by the cutting-edge approach taken by Lucy Fraser of Albyn Housing Society and Matt Stevenson of Carbon Dynamic towards health and housing in the context of Scotland’s ageing population. They have been working together on a project to design high-tech, low-energy adaptable housing units complete with state-of-the-art wellness sensors that can monitor a resident’s health and potentially predict changes—for example, before they happen. They are collaborating with northern universities on artificial intelligence used in the oil industry to help to develop their design. Their vision of Scotland as a global leader in predictive health is truly awe-inspiring. Again, to answer the point made by the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray), this is about working in collaboration with other Arctic states, not narrowing our vision just to environmental issues.

Another pioneering initiative showcased at the Arctic Circle conference was that of Lateral North, a Glasgow-based design agency run by two creative young people who specialise in collaboration aimed at redefining Scotland’s relationship with the Arctic north and our Nordic neighbours. It uses virtual and augmented reality technology to map out ideas across areas such as town planning, tourism and shipping. A recent project saw it working with the Anchorage Museum in Alaska, engaging with indigenous communities to tackle societal challenges through urban planning. It sees Alaska and Scotland—the relationship between them—as the two gateways to the Arctic and the north. This is about how we can capitalise on that unique approach; it is a really inspirational project.

I appreciate that some areas I have mentioned are devolved either partly or in full. The Scottish Government deal with the devolved issues, but the major reserved area for the UK Government in terms of the Arctic is defence. The retreat of sea ice and the Arctic opens up commercial opportunities, but also increases the risk of military conflict in the region. We have seen recent submarine activity in Scottish waters, which is reaching levels beyond even what we experienced during the cold war, with Russia increasing its military footprint in the region. Members will also be aware that NATO has recently announced the formation of a new command to protect sea lines of communication between North America and Europe. That presents the UK with a unique opportunity to make representations to our NATO allies to base the new maritime command in Scotland. I call on the Minister to address that.

The Scottish Government recognise the geopolitical importance of the new north and have taken what steps they can to formalise our willingness and eagerness to
work with Arctic nations. In 2014, the Scottish Government and the European Policies Research Centre hosted an international conference on regional co-operation in the Arctic. In 2016, the First Minister made a keynote speech at the Arctic Circle Assembly in Reykjavik and, as I have mentioned several times, we hosted the Arctic Circle forum in Edinburgh a few weeks ago. As well as issuing a Nordic-Baltic policy statement, Fiona Hyslop, Cabinet Secretary for external affairs, announced at the closing session of the conference that the Scottish Government would seek to develop a new Arctic strategy.

I warmly welcome the moves Scotland is making towards closer collaboration with our northern neighbours, given the range of devolved issues at stake. However, foreign affairs remains reserved to the UK Government. It is therefore vital that those sentiments are mirrored here in Westminster to ensure we have a consistent approach over all Arctic issues. By appointing an Arctic ambassador, the UK Government could signal their intent to work more closely with the Arctic countries on areas of mutual interest. That would also provide greater focus on British-Arctic affairs, allow for greater scrutiny and co-ordination of policy development in this area, and provide a platform for initiating trade missions to the region and work on energy projects. All that is even more important in the face of a hard Brexit, which could damage our economic links with many of our neighbours to the south. That is why now, more than ever, we should be encouraging the UK to look north.

For me, the key message of all this is one of collaboration. By working together, sharing our experiences and learning from one another, we can achieve great things. The many similarities that we in Scotland have with the countries of the Arctic make Scotland well placed to engage a multiple-level approach, but we need the UK Government to support and complement that engagement.

The appointment of an Arctic ambassador is not a novel idea: France, Japan, Poland and Singapore all have ambassadors responsible for Arctic affairs. All eight Arctic states also have Arctic ambassadors, special Arctic envoys or special representatives. The UK is clearly lagging behind in that respect. I suggest we follow the example given by the House of Lords Arctic Committee, which in 2015 recommended that the UK appoint an Arctic ambassador. I urge the Government now, at this critical time for our future relations with other nations, to take heed and give serious consideration to the appointment of an Arctic ambassador, even if that means allowing Scotland to take the lead in the UK, or for the UK, on the issue.

I thank the Minister in advance for his response, which I am sure will be well considered, and I would welcome further opportunities to discuss this matter with him in greater detail. Mr Hosie, I hope you have a wonderful day.

11.17 am

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I thank the hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman) for securing the debate. The United Kingdom has a long history of involvement in the Arctic. As Minister for the polar regions, I welcome this opportunity to set out the Government’s approach to the Arctic and the steps we are taking to ensure that the United Kingdom remains active and influential there. I will also respond to the specific question of whether we should appoint an Arctic ambassador, but first I will set out the context in which our Arctic policy is based and the extent of our work on the Arctic.

The Arctic is changing rapidly. The effects of climate change are perhaps more visible there than anywhere else on the planet. Temperatures there are rising twice as fast as at lower latitudes, and we are already seeing the dramatic impact of that across the northern hemisphere in a growing number of extreme weather incidents. Within the region itself, declining levels of sea ice are attracting greater economic activity. There are opportunities for the UK, but equally, we must take our obligations seriously to ensure that only responsible development takes place in the Arctic.

Our Arctic policy is set in that context of a rapidly changing climate, which means that the co-operative approach we have always taken is now all the more important. The UK has a prominent voice in all international organisations with a role in the governance of the region. We are rightly seen by the Arctic states as a reliable and pragmatic neighbour. That means working with all the countries that have a stake in the Arctic—the main eight are labelled as the Arctic states—and we do that principally through the Arctic Council, at which we have held observer status since its inception in 1996. We enjoy excellent economic ties with Arctic states, which are enhanced by my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr Prisk) in his role as the Prime Minister’s trade envoy to the Nordic region.

A co-operative approach is the right basis for ensuring that we can continue our long record of involvement in the Arctic, particularly as more nations declare their Arctic interests. It underpins our ability to conduct pioneering scientific research and to make the most of any economic opportunities that may arise, while taking due account of our environmental responsibilities. The UK has consistently been at the forefront of international regulatory developments that aim significantly to reduce the risk of Arctic pollution. We maintained strong involvement in finalising the environmental aspects of the polar shipping code and the ongoing discussions regarding the impact of black carbon emissions on the Arctic.

A central strand of our policy is to continue to support the Arctic research of our world-renowned scientists. Only three other countries—the US, Russia and Canada—produce more Arctic science papers than the UK. The Government are supporting pioneering Arctic research in a number of ways: first, through increased diplomacy and exchanges, including recent visits to Arctic states by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s chief scientific adviser, Robin Grimes; secondly, through the strengthened Arctic science office of the Natural Environment Research Council, which is giving more support to UK Arctic science; and thirdly, through our network of science and innovation officers in our embassies in Arctic countries, who are increasing their engagement in the Arctic Council’s working groups and have helped to promote the UK’s scientific excellence in Arctic science.
As the Arctic itself is ever changing, so too must our policy adapt and change. I am therefore pleased to announce that we will renew our Arctic policy framework early next year. We intend that to be an evolution, not a revolution, and we will reaffirm our commitment to partnership and international collaboration in the Arctic. Our vision remains one of a safe and secure Arctic that is well governed in partnership with indigenous peoples and in line with international law. The new framework will remain a cross-government document and will take account of the views of the devolved Administrations. I saw the Scottish Government’s recent announcement that they intend to develop their own Arctic strategy. I trust it will be in line with the UK’s framework and focused on their areas of competence.

As I hope everyone agrees, the UK can be proud of the positive role we are playing in the Arctic. None the less, having carefully considered the arguments set out today, I do not believe that appointing an Arctic ambassador, as some countries have done, is the right approach for the UK. Given our wide diversity of interests and established engagement across the Arctic states and within the Arctic Council, we do not think that it would add value. As Minister for the polar regions, I am already supported by a senior Foreign and Commonwealth Office official who oversees the development and implementation of the UK’s Arctic policy framework, chairs the cross-Government Arctic network and ensures the UK has appropriate representation at the Arctic Council and other key international Arctic events.

I am not convinced that the appointment of an Arctic ambassador would add significant value to existing structures and roles or justify the additional costs involved. We believe that the existing structure of Government, working properly at official level, does the job. I hope everyone agrees that the UK has been a prominent voice in Arctic affairs for many years. The Government are determined to maintain that level of interest and influence. The arrival of new interested parties, such as Asian nations, challenges us all to ensure our voice is heard just as prominently. We will continue to make the most of new opportunities for co-operation and to encourage our scientists, businesses and non-governmental groups to continue to pursue their interests in the Arctic.

Climate change means that international co-operation will be more important than ever. We want to ensure that the Arctic remains a place of peace and stability, and we will continue to work in partnership with all of those who have interests in the Arctic region.

Question put and agreed to.

11.24 am

Sitting suspended.

Legal Aid

[Mr Laurence Robertson in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op):
I beg to move,

That this House has considered the provision of legal aid.

Thank you, Mr Robertson, for calling me to move the motion in this critical debate on legal aid provision in the United Kingdom. As ever, it is an honour to serve under your chairmanship.

When people lack the money or knowledge to enforce their rights, those rights are worth nothing more than the paper they are written on. It is unacceptable that, in 2017, justice is fast regressing to a system that is not served to all, but instead belongs to those with the deepest pockets. Failings in the legal aid system are taking away people’s ability to defend their rights in practice, which is creating a system where a person’s income or economic status is a key determinant of whose rights matter when they are most needed.

That increasingly worrying situation is the result of a conscious political choice to restrict access. Just as the Labour party was founded more than a century ago to give working people representation in Parliament, legal aid was introduced by Clement Attlee’s pioneering Labour Government in 1949, alongside the pillars of the welfare state, to rebalance the scales of justice. The principle underpinning its creation was the belief that every person should have equal access to, and protection under, the law, regardless of financial position or social status. That was, and still is, a key way to support our ambition for a fairer society.

Since then, legal aid has been a lifeline for the vulnerable. It has funded action to stop justice being available only to the privileged few in a wide range of areas, from housing and family break-ups to benefits assessments. As Lord Bach stated in a Fabian Society investigation of the state of legal aid, which was recently commissioned by the Labour party:

“We will all lean on the law at some point in our lives... an effective legal system in which all can access justice fairly is the cornerstone of a free society...The law guarantees our rights, underlines our duties, and provides an equitable and orderly means of resolving disputes.”

But in all parts of the UK it is becoming harder and harder for the poorest people to access justice. Access to legal aid lawyers continues to become ever more difficult, with the Law Society warning of “legal aid deserts” where there are no legal providers, or just a sole legal provider, for whole regions.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that the number of legal aid providers has fallen by 20% since the Government changed the eligibility criteria?

Mr Sweeney: Absolutely. I will refer to that statistic later. It is a shocking indictment of the cuts and the attrition of the access available to the weakest in our society, who rely on that point of contact and are otherwise shut out of the legal system altogether. Where in
our country someone lives should never affect their ability to access justice, but it does, because of the wide variation in availability of legal aid providers.

Legal aid is often a lifeline, particularly for women, when the case is domestic violence, family law or employment tribunals on equal pay, unfair dismissal or discrimination. In my constituency and across the country, it is clear that we need to relearn just how critical legal aid is as a cornerstone of a civilised society. Although Scotland has a distinctive legal system within the United Kingdom, the Law Society of Scotland recently raised concerns about the sustainability of the legal aid system there, stating that, in particular, "current rates of payment for legal aid work risk making the provision of legal services to some of the poorest and most vulnerable in our society" simply "uneconomical". We already know that gaps are developing in the provision of legal aid in parts of Scotland, and we must work hard to stop those gaps growing. The Law Society of Scotland also said that a lack of investment in legal assistance had made it "increasingly difficult to maintain a sustainable, high-quality legal assistance system" across Scotland. It urged crucial investment to halt the ongoing real-terms decrease in legal aid funding.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman welcome the Scottish Government’s review of legal aid? The legislation is 30 years old, and the Government now seek to ensure that full access to public legal aid continues.

Mr Sweeney: I think we both recognise that the situation in England and Wales is much more acute than it is in Scotland, but none the less, there are challenges facing the legal system in Scotland. I welcome that review and I hope it will take into consideration the financial constraints that legal aid provision in Scotland has faced in recent years, and take heed of what the Law Society of Scotland has urged.

To look back at the wider issue, an increasing lack of funds across the UK means that a growing number of solicitors will be unable to take on legal aid cases. The report “The financial health of legal aid firms in Scotland” of February this year found that those relying on legal aid might soon be unable to find a solicitor because many law firms simply cannot afford to carry out legal aid work.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate and giving us a chance to intervene or speak on the subject. On average, since 2011, Northern Ireland’s annual bill for legal aid has been in excess of £102 million. Does he agree that, as we live in an increasingly litigious world, legal aid must be available to support those who have been wronged and cannot afford redress? Does he further agree that we must ensure they have protection? Protection is what they need, which is why they need legal aid.

Mr Sweeney: I agree. The fundamental, critical point of judgment on this is equality of access, not necessarily cost. Cost is a secondary consideration. Access is the fundamental right that all should be entitled to. That is the challenge we face, whereby some of the smallest legal aid firms are carrying out legal aid work at a loss and are at serious risk of not being able to offer legal aid work at all. Civil legal aid solicitors are paid for only approximately two thirds of the work they carry out, and criminal legal aid solicitors are paid for only three quarters of the work they carry out.

As if that were not bad enough, we have seen even greater ravages to the system in England and Wales following the cuts made by the Tory Government. That has taught us what happens when access to justice is removed from people in our democracy: further inequality, marginalisation of the most vulnerable, a self-defeating increased cost to the public purse and a fundamental impact on our society.

Access to justice has been seriously undermined by the Conservative Government, with hundreds of thousands of people unable to afford to defend their rights following savage cuts to the legal aid budget as part of the 2012 reforms, where the introduction of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012—LASPO—left many vulnerable people unable to defend themselves in areas as fundamental as housing, employment, immigration and welfare benefits. We have seen not only a decline in access to legal aid providers, but, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), the number of providers cut by a shocking 20% in just five years, and a limiting of the scope of legal aid itself. It has been an all-out assault on justice.

This summer’s Supreme Court ruling that the Government acted unlawfully by imposing employment tribunal fees underlines just how far they have gone in restricting people’s access to justice. We have a Tory Government attacking people’s living standards and, at the same time, deliberately undermining their ability to defend themselves from those very attacks. It is a cynical, Kafkaesque nightmare perpetrated on the poorest. Britain’s most senior judge, Lord Thomas, has said:

“Our justice system has become unaffordable to most.”

Amnesty International’s 2016 report, “Cuts that hurt: the impact of legal aid cuts in England on access to justice”, states:

“Cuts to legal aid imposed by this Government have decimated access to justice and left thousands of the most vulnerable without essential legal advice and support. We are in danger of creating a two-tier civil justice system, open to those who can afford it, but increasingly closed to the poorest and most in need of its protection. From parents fighting for access to their children, to those trying to stay in the country they have grown up in, and to people with mental health problems at risk of homelessness, these cuts have hit the most vulnerable, the most.”

LASPO removed whole areas of law from the scope of legal aid and drastically reduced the percentage of the population eligible for the legal advice service and representation that still exists. Spending has fallen from £2.2 billion to £1.62 billion per year. As a result, the number of civil legal aid cases, which was 573,744 in the year to April 2013, has now fallen to a shocking 146,618 in the year to April 2017. In some regions the fall was even greater. For example, in October The Independent reported:

“Legal aid cuts have triggered a staggering 99.5 per cent collapse in the number of people receiving state help in benefits cases"
with just 440 claimants given assistance in the last financial year, down from a massive 83,000 before the £1 billion of cuts imposed by the Tories. That is absolutely shocking.

One of the Government’s stated aims in no longer funding lawyers for low-income couples arguing over divorce or child arrangements was that that would encourage them to seek mediation instead, but the Government have acknowledged that the opposite has happened, with mediation numbers falling off a cliff and a huge rise in people attempting to navigate the family courts with no lawyer or legal representation. Even more appallingly, not a single person with a discrimination complaint was referred to see a legal aid lawyer in the last year, as *BuzzFeed News* revealed just last week.

During a time of austerity, it is fanciful to believe that the decline in numbers reflects reduced demand. This is a deliberate effort to exploit the weakest in our society and deny their access to justice.

**Ian C. Lucas** (Wrexham) (Lab): I am most grateful to my hon. Friend, first for his securing the debate, and secondly for making such a passionate case. The reality is that professional, useful advice for vulnerable people is decreasing—not only through the diminishing of legal aid, but with citizens advice bureaux being threatened with closure, such as in my constituency. These people need help, and we have a responsibility to them to devise a system that will give them that help.

**Mr Sweeney:** Absolutely. Wherever vulnerable people in our society turn, they are increasingly finding impediments and blockages placed in their way. That is increasing all sorts of problems and harms that people in society face, including mental and physical health problems.

Although many people have decided to give up pursuing a legal case because of the cost, even where legal aid remains in scope, many now represent themselves in court, as has been mentioned. Since LASPO, for the first time, more than half of parents—58%, many of whom were mothers from poor backgrounds—went to court without a lawyer to fight their case.

As we all know, in many walks of life, spending money early on leads to savings down the line. It was therefore very depressing to observe cuts falling particularly hard on services that help to advise whether someone has a case and how to proceed in the first place, which can prevent problems from escalating. Increasing funding would be a money saving measure, but instead, as so often, the Government, who profess their fiscal prudence, end up throwing good money after bad in their obsession with destroying the fabric of our public realm.

The Government are reviewing LASPO, and we urge them to guarantee the reintroduction of legal aid for early advice from a lawyer as part of that review. Restoring early legal advice would not only help to resolve many legal problems, but would save taxpayers’ money by reducing pressures on the courts and elsewhere. In October, the new President of the Supreme Court, Lady Justice Hale, described LASPO cuts as “a false economy”, and said that early legal advice would help to resolve many legal problems and save money by reducing pressure on the courts system.

As the Law Society explained this week, early legal advice helps to address problems before they escalate. For example, in housing law, although legal aid is still available to defend possession proceedings, that is only when the loss of a home is imminent and the landlord has sought an order for possession. A lack of early legal advice can create unnecessary costs for the taxpayer due to cases going to court that could have been resolved earlier. Worsening legal problems can also create other knock-on effects and costs to the public purse, potentially causing issues such as poor health, homelessness and debt.

Early legal advice is vital in housing law. For example, a lack of early advice on minor disrepair issues can mean problems such as faulty electrics or a leaking roof escalating, potentially creating health, social and financial problems, as we most appallingly saw earlier this year with the Grenfell Tower disaster. Early legal advice is also important in family law, but is no longer available in family breakdown and child custody cases. Because of that, mediation referrals have plummeted, putting pressure on courts and therefore on public finances. A Citizens Advice study estimated that for every £1 of legal aid spending on housing advice, the state saved £2.34; for every £1 spent on debt advice, it saved £2.98; and for every £1 spent on employment advice, a massive £7.13 was saved.

The Labour party is seeking to repair the broken justice system to ensure that people can defend their basic legal rights. One of the first acts of my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) as Labour leader was to support the establishment of a commission on access to justice, made up of legal experts and chaired by Lord Bach, whom I mentioned earlier. Over nearly two years, the commission heard from more than 100 individuals and organisations with special expertise in all parts of the justice system. The commission proposed, among other measures, the return of legal aid in some areas and increasing the availability of early legal advice.

There is much in Lord Bach’s report that the Government could implement ahead of the next general election if they were serious about restoring access to justice. Labour’s 2017 general election manifesto committed the party to “immediately re-establish early advice entitlements in the Family Courts”, which includes protecting children from harm and most domestic violence cases. The Government should do the same.

The Government must use their review of LASPO fundamentally to repair the damage caused by their legal aid reforms since 2012, rather than simply to apply a sticking plaster to what is, it is increasingly apparent, a broken system. They should also use the review to look at restoring legal aid for early legal help on housing and welfare benefits. Opposition Members also urge the Government to review the legal aid means tests, including the capital tests for those on income-related benefits.

In Scotland, we need to continue pushing to ensure sufficient resources for legal aid providers, so that provision is maintained. That includes challenging the long-term underfunding of the system, and the modernisation and streamlining of legal aid, to ensure that access is available to any citizen in need of its support. My constituents,
and people across Scotland and the rest of the UK, must be able to have confidence in our legal systems and must be confident that the social status or wealth of an individual cannot usurp the most basic concepts of right and wrong.

2.44 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) for securing the debate. May I also compliment the Labour party on introducing legal aid 68 years ago? It has been of great benefit to many over that 68 years and continues to be so.

Here in the United Kingdom, we are rightly proud that everyone is equal under the law. Across the United Kingdom, our separate legal systems are united by the common principles of fairness, equality and respect for human rights, which have made the British justice system respected worldwide. Legal aid is crucial to ensuring that our justice systems live up to those principles. Without it, access to justice would become the preserve only of those who can afford it.

Legal aid is there to ensure that as many persons as practicable, regardless of their ability to pay legal fees, which can be very expensive, have access to fair representation in a bid to obtain their legal rights. That is why our legal aid system must be sustainable and up to date, and I for one am pleased that the UK Government recognise that and have reformed legal aid in England and Wales to modernise it and to put it on a secure financial footing for the future.

United Kingdom spending on legal aid massively outstrips the European average; it dwarfs that of most European nations and is, surprisingly, above France's and Germany's.

Stuart C. McDonald: The hon. Gentleman is comparing apples and oranges. The legal systems in France and other European countries are different from the adversarial system we have here. It is probably not fair to compare only legal aid budgets, without looking at overall justice costs.

Bill Grant: The hon. Gentleman may well be right. The fact is that we spend more per head than Germany, but I accept that that there are other considerations to take into account.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making an error by reading out the Minister's speech from the LASPO Bill's Committee stage five years ago. What he says is no truer now than it was then. He should be looking at the effects of legal aid cuts, not the incorrect predictions made at the time the legislation went through Parliament.

Bill Grant: I note the hon. Gentleman's comments on the decisions on cuts. They adjusted the system. It is a suitable system, which still remains, and I am sure many people will continue to benefit from legal aid.

As has been said, legal aid is devolved in Scotland and decisions on its provision are quite rightly the Scottish Government's to make. Funding for legal aid was £138 million in a previous year; it is now down slightly by some millions, but it is fair to say that, per head, Scotland's legal aid spending is broadly in line with the UK Government's spending in England and Wales. When the Scottish National party came to power in Holyrood, Scotland's legal aid system was 20 years old, as the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) said. Ten years on, that system is 30 years old, and it now needs to be looked at, as I am sure he would agree. After a decade of SNP rule, and despite the enactment of the Legal Profession and Legal Aid (Scotland) Act 2007, Scotland's legal system would benefit from further reform.

It is true that we have seen some change, such as the court decision that prompted the Scottish Government to reconsider its Ministers' decision not to exercise discretion to provide legal aid to an alleged victim of domestic abuse who sought to oppose attempts to obtain her medical records. The Scottish Conservatives had repeatedly asked for that change, to bring Scotland into line with England and Wales, but the Scottish Government repeatedly refused until the courts forced their hand. They were then slow to act: only in February did they finally see fit to launch a review of the Scottish legal aid system, which I commend. I hope the Scottish Government will act soon and follow the UK Government's lead in making legal aid sustainable, modern and fit for the future.

Stuart C. McDonald: Is the hon. Gentleman seriously suggesting that the Scottish Government should follow the UK Government's example by removing family, immigration, housing and welfare cases from the scope of legal aid? He cannot possibly think that that would be a positive development.

Bill Grant: It will be entirely up to the Scottish Government to decide what course they take.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): Order. It is my intention to call the Front-Bench spokespeople at 3.28 pm, which hopefully will allow two minutes for Mr Sweeney to respond. If hon. Members keep their speeches to five or six minutes, that will enable me to call everyone who attempts to catch my eye.

2.49 pm

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on legal aid, I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) on securing the debate. Mindful of your guidance, Mr Robertson, I will minimise my comments on the detail of what has happened to legal aid provision since LASPO was introduced.

The position was summarised very well this summer in the Law Society's report, “Access Denied?”, which said that legal aid is no longer available for those who need it, that those eligible for legal aid find it hard to access, that wide gaps in provision are not being addressed and that LASPO has had a wide and detrimental impact on the state and on society. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East explained how the scale of the reductions in legal aid provision has worked out in practice. We know that the total number of matter
starts for legal aid and controlled legal work fell from 933,815 cases in 2010 to 147,107 this year. That is a staggeringly precipitous fall in provision.

Although this debate is rightly about legal aid, it is worth mentioning the wider context. Legal aid sits alongside the provision of wider advice services, many of which were funded by local authorities, and in many cases there was co-provision of such services in the same premises. Because local government has had a 40% fall in funding in recent years, mainstream advice services and other forms of early help have also taken a significant cut. As my hon. Friend said, and I am sure everyone who contributes to the debate will say, it is often the most vulnerable people who experience the most deleterious consequences—people who are suffering from mental health problems, people who have language difficulties, people who are extremely stressed as a consequence of debt, benefit difficulties and impending homelessness. They need that assistance, but it has not been available.

I have one of the largest constituency caseloads involving disability benefits in the country. Often it is not understood that this is an inner-London issue, but it very much is. Those of us who have a significant welfare caseload in our constituencies have seen in particular the consequences for people who are losing their employment and support allowance, have lost their disability living allowance or are making claims for personal independence payments. They have found it extremely difficult to get not only early help but representation and advocacy to get their benefits restored, despite the well documented evidence that such early assistance significantly improves a claimant’s chances of being successful at appeal.

The local advice agencies in my area draw a clear line between the lack of early help, the consequences for people losing their benefits and the direct rise of dependency on food banks. There has been a 56% rise in the number of cases going to my local citizens advice bureau—often cases that previously would have been picked up by early legal help—and my food bank in north Paddington has seen a doubling of demand for its services. Those things are connected. In my borough, there has been a 93% fall in family legal help; a 51% fall in housing legal help; a 51% fall in housing certificate aided assistance despite a sharp rise in homelessness, in common with many other local areas; a 100% fall in welfare; a 99% fall in debt advice; and a 46% fall in the number of solicitors’ firms taking on cases. In common with many Members of Parliament, I have experienced a sharp rise in the number of people who are coming to me and to local councillors to seek the kind of legal help that they are no longer able to get because of the fall in legal aid provision.

Today’s debate is very well timed, with the announcement that the post-implementation review is under way. As has been referred to, the Law Society’s report on early help came out this week. I am sure I will not be the only one to reference and give huge credit to the Willy Bach commission report, which sets out a comprehensive analysis of what has happened since LASPO was introduced. I hope the work of the Law Society and the Bach commission will inform the Minister’s review.

I have a few questions for the Minister about the post-implementation review; it will be helpful if he can provide answers. What reassurances can he give that the post-implementation review will be thorough? The memorandum to the Justice Committee says it will be thorough, but we want to know what that will mean. Who will be on the advisory panels? Will the thorough work and consultation necessary to make this a meaningful review take place before Parliament rises for the summer recess next year? How will the review be conducted? Who will be consulted and how? Will there be written and oral evidence?

On early advice, we know about the impact of the reduction in numbers on the sustainability of practitioners. Ministry of Justice figures indicate that the total number of not-for-profits with legal aid contracts has fallen from 870 to 95 post-LASPO. That is a drop of 89%. Can the Minister assure us that, whatever the outcomes of the post-implementation review, there will be enough providers to pick up any additional provision of advice? Do the Government know how many people will be available to deliver legal aid after the changes are made? Many areas are now advice deserts, with law centres and practitioners having had to close. Who will provide this advice and what is the Minister doing to ensure there will be a flow of lawyers into an increasingly stressful and under-resourced legal aid service?

The Government say that the exceptional case funding system is a safety net. When it was discussed in Parliament, we were told that 5,000 to 7,000 cases per year were expected. In fact, the number of cases has been extremely limited. How will the Minister review that and ensure that exceptional case funding is adequate for purposes?

How will the shortfall in county court offices since their reconfiguration be dealt with? County court offices used to be able to assist not just by giving legal advice, but at least by providing some support—for example, if someone was applying to suspend a warrant, they could obtain the form and get the application listed through the county court. Now, many court offices are open for very limited hours or just for appointments, and that is another hurdle. Is the Minister aware of that, and can he give us some reassurance?

Finally, on the promises to improve the service for victims of domestic violence, we know that reforms have been thrashed out and that Ministry of Justice staff and family groups have been working on it. The Government have admitted that changes need to be made to protect those suffering domestic abuse, but that has been delayed for a number of months. Can the Minister tell us when those changes will be brought in?

2.57 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson, and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) and my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on legal aid. They have set out some of the facts and figures that show the astonishing decline in the availability of legal aid since the enactment of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, and I will not repeat those. I had the pleasure—if that is the right word—of leading for the Opposition, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) and the noble Lord Bach, during the year-long Committee stage of the LASPO Bill. It was pretty obvious then what the consequences were going to be, but we do not have to predict now; we have seen those consequences. That is why I was quite surprised to hear the hon. Member...
for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) repeating the shibboleths that we heard at that time: that this was just bringing us into line with what happens elsewhere, and that these were perfectly reasonable and affordable cuts. The figures we have seen show that the contrary is true.

In the other place, I think there were 11 defeats and three tied votes, all of which unfortunately were substantially reversed in this House. That was a significant indication of the level of concern, even while the Bill was going through Parliament. Were it not for the extraordinary discipline of the Liberal Democrats—this is possibly the only issue that all Members here will agree on—that would have been many more defeats, and we might have stopped some of these cuts going through. The Liberal Democrats turned out night after night to vote for legal aid cuts in the most stringent terms and ensure that those changes went through, with better discipline than the Tory peers, and we will continue to remind them about that.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East said, that was a sea change. It was reversing the legal aid policies put forward by the Labour Government of 1945 to ’50. The Bill at that time made legal aid permissive. In other words, legal aid was available, except where the legislation said that it was not available. LASPO completely reverses that and says that one has to define exactly the very specific means by which legal aid is made available. The net result is not only that in many areas, particularly of social welfare law, legal aid has been withdrawn specifically, but that in reality it has been withdrawn entirely, because neither the voluntary sector nor private practice can continue it with what meagre fare there is to allow it to operate. Many areas of the country have become advice deserts.

**Ian C. Lucas:** To pick up on the advice deserts point, during my 16-year parliamentary career, the Ministry of Justice and the local justice departments have very much moved away from their local communities and are now incredibly distant from the communities that they served. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to localise provision in a much better and more responsive way?

**Andy Slaughter:** My hon. Friend knows that very well from his professional background. I entirely agree with him and will say in a moment what I think should be done to reverse what he describes, but while we are diagnosing the problem, I must point out that there has been an extraordinary effect on the advice sector and on the courts. Indeed, we can see it in our surgeries. I do not know about other hon. Members, but I now provide 20-minute appointments, and often that is not long enough to see constituents. I refrain, not having a practice specifically any more, from giving legal advice, but that is in effect what people are coming to ask for, whether in areas of family law, immigration, employment or housing. These are not the sorts of complaint or issue that I remember dealing with 10 years ago. These people have come, possibly as a first port of call, to Members of Parliament—research has shown that this is the case—simply because there is nowhere else to go.

Let me use the example of my constituency. Many of our advice agencies—such as Threshold, which provides specialist housing advice, and the Shepherd’s Bush advice centre—and many of the specialist agencies dealing with specific communities have simply closed down. I am very lucky, in that I have an extremely supportive council. Labour took power again in 2014, and it is now rehousing and properly funding the Hammersmith law centre, which I have had the pleasure of being on the board of for some 30 years. Therefore, along with the citizens advice bureaux, some good provision remains in the area, but I suspect that it is the exception rather than the rule.

I pay tribute not only to Members of the House who have taken an interest in the subject, but to the practitioners out there in the country. My law centre is watched over by Sue James, who was legal aid lawyer of the year after 25 years of practice and setting up other law centres in London. It is the dedication of people such as her, Carol Storer of the Legal Aid Practitioners Group and Nicola Mackintosh that has in effect, despite the Government’s best efforts, kept the legal aid system going in this country over this period. However, it is absolutely at breaking point.

I therefore have something to ask of the Minister, who is an intelligent and fair man and knowledgeable in these areas, when he does the review, but let me just say this about the review. It is being done at the last possible moment, and possibly beyond the last possible moment, because if I remember correctly, the undertaking given during the passage of LASPO was that the review would begin within three to five years. I think that the end of the five years will be next April and that the review is not starting till the summer, so we really are squeezing it into the last minute. I hope that it will be a proper review and that it will look in particular at the Bach commission report, because that is an extremely thorough report by the people in this country who probably best understand the issue and the problems that arise. I hope that it looks across the board at what needs to be done—not just, as we have heard, at early advice and the restoration of legal aid, particularly in areas of social welfare law, but at the means test, at the system for contributions and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas) said, at the localisation of services, because nothing is really working at the moment.

We need a root-and-branch review, and fresh legislation may well be required. Unless the Government are prepared to look at the matter with fresh eyes, instead of taking the blinkered approach that was taken with LASPO, it will be not only bad for my constituents and those of other hon. Members present, but bad for the system of justice in this country, because the courts are not functioning properly. Litigants in person are flooding the courts, and there are delays throughout the system. The compound effect of cuts in the legal aid system and the Courts Service over the past five years is that we can no longer say that we have a system of justice of which we can be proud, and I greatly regret that.

**Ellie Reeves** (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. As a former employment rights lawyer, I am passionate about legal aid and access to justice. Many of my hon. Friends and I have made important points about the need for increased access to justice. Coincidentally, yesterday I chaired a meeting of the parliamentary Labour party’s Back-Bench
that the case involved consideration of a local authority’s
representation be in the public interest, despite the fact
it did not meet the LASPO requirement that the
refused by the Legal Aid Agency on the grounds that
the inquest. However, the application for legal aid was
topped over on to the child. Alexia’s mother applied for
the children’s play area in a London park. The swing
who died of head injuries while playing on a swing in
attention to the case of five-year-old Alexia Walenkaki,
public interest in legal aid being granted.
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although the Legal Aid Agency will accept applications
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Eur opean con vention on human rights , or other enf orcea ble
provisions introduced by LASPO. Exceptional case funding
Legal Aid Agency under the “exceptional case funding”
provisions introduced by LASPO. Exceptional case funding
available for categories of law that are not ordinarily
in scope of legal aid, and where failure to provide legal
services would breach an individual’s rights under the
European convention on human rights, or other enforceable
EU rights relating to the provision of legal services.
However, exceptional case funding applications are
complex and time-consuming. Lawyers receive payment
for an ECF application only if it is successful, and
although the Legal Aid Agency will accept applications
from applicants in person, very few are made and even
fewer are successful. In addition, the definition of
exceptional case funding does not provide an adequate
safety net for inquests, as an applicant has to show that
there is an article 2—right to life—issue, or a wider
public interest in legal aid being granted.
The Law Society’s “Access Denied?” publication drew
attention to the case of five-year-old Alexia Walenkaki,
who died of head injuries while playing on a swing in
the children’s play area in a London park. The swing
was suspended from two tree trunks when one of them
topped over on to the child. Alexia’s mother applied for
exceptional case funding in order to be represented at
the inquest. However, the application for legal aid was
refused by the Legal Aid Agency on the grounds that
it did not meet the LASPO requirement that the
representation be in the public interest, despite the fact
that the case involved consideration of a local authority’s
responsibility to ensure safety in a public area.

Legal aid for inquests is even more important, as
most bereaved families will not be able to afford private
legal representation, particularly for lengthy inquest
hearings. Most recently, the Hillsborough inquiry shone
a light on this important issue, calling for families to be
fully involved in inquests, and for equality of arms, so
that no one is under-represented in these critical types
of cases.
The Bach commission report acknowledges that access
to justice is lacking in this area and that reform is
urgently needed. I tabled early-day motion 498 on legal
aid for inquests as I believe the Government should take
urgent action in this area, and provide access to justice
for bereaved families by providing crucially needed legal
aid to the family of the deceased in all cases where the
state is funding one or more of the other parties. I urge
Members from across the House to sign the early-day
motion.

3.10 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): It is
a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship in this
important debate, Mr Robertson. I congratulate my hon.
Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney)
on securing it.

To get perspective on the problem of access to legal
aid, we first need to remind ourselves that the Legal Aid
and Advice Act 1949 came in as one of the Labour
Government’s swathe of measures to help alleviate poverty
in the welfare state following the 1945 election victory.
Over the years, scope was increased to keep up to date
with social developments, but over the past 25 years, we
have seen a gradual erosion of legal aid, culminating in
a full-scale attack on it via the Legal Aid, Sentencing
and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, or LASPO, to
give it its shorter name.

Let us be under no illusions: LASPO was introduced
under the cloak of austerity to cut the legal aid budget.
To that extent, it has succeeded, cutting the total spend
on legal aid from £2.499 billion in 2010-11 to £1.554 billion
in 2016-17: a cut of £945 million, or 38%, to give the
percentage total. Taking areas such as some family law
and welfare law out of scope is having a devastating effect
on some of the most vulnerable people in our society.

Couples who split up, sometimes acrimoniously, and
who disagree about access to the children are not legally
represented owing to the cuts, leaving a judge in the
invidious position of trying to sort out the case with
limited documentation. Who knows what the impact
will be on the children while the court tries to muddle
through the process? This could be the most important
decision in a child’s life, yet we are likely to have two
agrieved people thrown into a combative situation,
with terminology and procedures misunderstood, and
making matters worse for the child. Or there are instances
where a vulnerable person has a valid case for claiming
backdated housing benefit, but is unable to find a
lawyer to help, because an application to a social security
tribunal is taken out of scope, leaving the person with
arrears of rent and facing eviction. We have gone from
80% of people being eligible for legal aid to only 20% being
eligible. The onslaught on the legal profession owing to
the legal aid cuts has resulted in legal aid firms closing,
leaving legal advice deserts in more and more parts of
the country, and people desperate, with little chance of
getting proper representation.

justice group on this very subject, drawing particular
attention to the measures outlined in the Bach commission
report, which aims to redress the injustices caused by
LASPO.

I am firmly of the view that the abolition of legal aid
for early advice is a false economy. It means that far
more cases end up going to court that should have been
resolved earlier. My experience as a lawyer was that
when I gave clients clear legal advice from the outset
about their prospects of success, they were far less likely
to pursue an unmeritorious claim through the courts.
The removal of legal aid for early advice has caused a
clear and undeniable increase in the number of people
representing themselves in court.

National Audit Office figures and research by the
Law Society show a staggering 30% increase in litigants
in person in family court cases. In that emotive area of
law, litigants in person often result in longer hearings
and in victims of domestic violence having to face their
abuser in court. Moreover, the failure to provide early
legal advice can have significant knock-on effects for
other departments and the public purse. For example,
as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East
(Mr Sweeney) said, the cost of someone being evicted
due to arrears of rent and facing eviction. We have gone from
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the cuts, leaving a judge in the invidious position of trying to
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aid to the family of the deceased in all cases where the
state is funding one or more of the other parties. I urge
Members from across the House to sign the early-day
motion.
3.16 pm
Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson.

Today’s debate cuts right to the heart of what we mean by justice. Legal aid has been a crucial instrument in ensuring that equal access to justice is attainable. After all, if access to justice is not equal, can we call it justice at all? My surgeries, like those of my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), are full of people seeking legal advice. Unlike many hon. Members here today, I do not have a legal background.

The exact meaning of justice may be contested, but it should be quite clear to us all that a society that allows for adequate legal representation for those who can afford it while denying the same opportunities for those who cannot is not a just society. As we have heard, the Law Society has reported on the impact of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012. Its findings are stark and paint a picture of a Government prioritising savings for the Exchequer over basic legal rights for our citizens. It makes 25 recommendations to improve the provision of legal advice and representation. It will be interesting to see whether this Government will actually implement the recommendations of one of our foremost legal organisations.

The 2012 Act has significantly reduced the number of areas of law in which legal aid applies, while at the same time tightening the criteria for qualification. Among the findings of the Law Society report is one that “Large numbers of people, including children and those on low incomes, are now excluded from whole areas of free or subsidised legal advice”:

It describes changes to means testing as “counter-intuitive”, and even where people qualify for legal aid, they often struggle to access it due to inadequate provision of services, resulting in “legal aid deserts”. Reductions in central Government funds have forced many high street legal aid firms and third sector providers to go under. The increase in legal aid deserts has resulted in many people who qualify for legal aid not being able to access it. Almost a third of the legal aid areas in England and Wales have one or no legal aid housing advice providers. Neither Shropshire nor Suffolk has a housing legal aid advice provider. Children, people with mental health issues and people with low levels of literacy and numeracy are now excluded as a result of changes to legal aid provision.

The Joint Committee on Human Rights condemned the lack of access to justice for children back in 2015 and called on the Government to correct that astonishing situation. Those calls were not heeded. The Act prevents the maximum income cap for legal aid qualification from increasing with inflation, while capital eligibility rules mean there are many benefit claimants who do not qualify for legal aid. The Justice Committee has argued that a lack of sufficient advertising of the mandatory telephone gateway has resulted in its underuse, although it is intended to be the initial point of contact for legal advice on debt, special educational needs and discrimination law.

At every turn the Government have sought to cut public services, but equal access to justice must be one of the fundamental tenets of a healthy democracy. That is why the Government so willfully undermine that principle tells us all we need to know about their priorities: not ensuring fairness, not ensuring the preservation of basic rights and not ensuring a good society—social security for the rich, economic insecurity for the rest. Without legal representation being available to all, we no longer have a system of justice, but a system of privilege.

3.20 pm
Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. We have had
a good and lively debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) on securing it. This is an important subject because a well functioning system of legal aid is a crucial means of ensuring access to justice, and is therefore essential for the operation of the rule of law and democracy itself. This subject has been raised a number of times even in the couple of years that I have been an MP, reflecting widespread concerns about the radical overhaul of legal aid since LASPO came into force in 2013. With the review of LASPO going ahead in England and Wales, and the Scottish Government conducting their own review of legislation that is now 30 years old, now is an appropriate time for this debate.

The hon. Gentleman made a couple of points in relation to Scotland, and if time permits I will say a little bit about that. For now, suffice it to say that the review there will be building from a strong position. That is remarkably different from the system created by the UK Government, where a 38% real-terms cut in funding has left hundreds of thousands to navigate the law and the legal system alone, not because of their means, but because the scope of the legal aid scheme has been so drastically reduced. If you want to cut down to courts in London, Mr Robertson, you would struggle to find a single litigant lawyer or judge who would say that the system in England and Wales is better than the one in Scotland; it would be the reverse.

While the UK Government’s review of LASPO is welcome, if we are honest we already know it has been a complete disaster—one which, as the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) has pointed out, could have been averted had the Government engaged in discussion and looked at evidence prior to introducing LASPO, rather than five years after it wreaked havoc on the justice system. Whether it is the Justice Committee of this House, the National Audit Office, the Public Accounts Committee, the legal profession or third sector organisations, few if any have a good word to say about the reforms.

The statistics, as the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) said, illustrate a drastic reduction in the number of cases of publicly funded representation right from the implementation of the LASPO Act, but it is individual stories about those who are left without access to justice that bring home the reality of the problem. Credit must be given to organisations such as Amnesty International and Coram Children’s Legal Centre for highlighting some of those cases in various reports and briefings. When the Lord Chief Justice of England and Wales is saying publicly that “Our system of justice has become unaffordable to most,” there can be no doubt that we are in a bad place.

There cannot be a starker example of austerity at all costs than the LASPO cuts, which were introduced without any proper evidence-based research,” according to chairman of the Bar association. Parliament’s Justice Committee found that LASPO had unambiguously failed to achieve three of its four stated goals, including targeting legal aid towards those who need it most, delivering more for less money, and discouraging unnecessary and adversarial litigation. In relation to the fourth and final goal the Committee stated that “while it had made significant savings in the cost of the scheme, the Ministry had harmed access to justice for some litigants.”

On the subject of claimant savings, which the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) and others spoke about, I hope the review will consider the extent to which the so-called savings, like in many other austerity cuts, are in fact costs passed on to other public services. As the Justice Committee also said, efforts to target legal aid “have suffered from the weakness that they have often been aimed at the point after a crisis has already developed, such as in housing repossession cases, rather than being preventive.”

Money saved by the Ministry of Justice means more money spent by homelessness services and social work departments. Meanwhile courts are required to spend more time and resources dealing with party litigants.

The arguments for LASPO the Government used in previous debates have struggled to stand up to scrutiny. They sought to justify the cuts on the basis that it encourages mediation, but as we heard earlier, that is not happening, and I think the Government now acknowledge that. In the year prior to LASPO, there were 31,000 mediation assessments and 14,000 mediation starts, but by 2016-17 the numbers had fallen to 13,000 mediation assessments and 7,700 mediation starts—reductions of 61% and 44% respectively. As the Government were told beforehand, people who are given early legal advice will be more inclined than those who are not to the view that mediation is the best course of action.

Another key argument used in the past is that the legal aid system in England and Wales is one of the most generous in the world. The hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) hinted at that. As I said in my intervention on him, that is comparing apples and oranges, particularly in relation to continental systems, which are inquisitorial rather than adversarial, so more resources are spent on other parts of the system than legal aid. England and Wales may have one of the most expensive legal aid bills in Europe, but it is a long way down the European league table overall when we look at the total bill for providing justice.

The Scottish Government have announced their own review of legal aid. In previous debates on this subject, I quoted from an article by Professor Alan Paterson, so I am pleased to see he has been included in the Government’s review board. He is a legal academic at Strathclyde University and chair of the International Legal Action Group. In 2012, as LASPO was making its way through this place, he wrote an article highlighting that in fact, per capita spend on legal aid in England and Wales had been higher than in Scotland. He asked whether that meant that provision in Scotland was less extensive or generous. The answer was that, on the contrary, the Scottish scheme was still more generous, even in those circumstances.

First, the Scottish system was more generous in scope. That is even more true after LASPO. For example, in Scotland you can still get legal advice and representation on housing, debt, immigration, family, employment law and so on. Secondly, it remained more generous in coverage, with a significantly higher proportion of the population financially eligible for legal aid. The Scottish system had managed to achieve lower per capita spend while remaining more generous. Even if all of Lord Bach’s recommendations were fulfilled, Scotland’s system would remain more generous than that in England and Wales. There were some reasons why that was the case, which went well beyond policy choices, including,
for example, the high prevalence of expensive fraud cases in England and Wales. However, for Professor Paterson the crucial difference was that there had been greater success in Scotland in reforming court procedures, both civil and criminal, to reduce legal aid spend. Instead of reducing legal aid spend by not funding people properly to access the court system, the court system was made cheaper to fund access to.

In the months ahead, the group on which Professor Paterson sits, chaired by the CEO of Carnegie Trust and involving lawyers, police, Citizen Advice and others, will look for “specific measures to reform Scotland’s system of legal aid, maintaining access to public funding for legal advice and representation in both civil and criminal cases, alongside measures to expand access to alternative methods of resolving disputes.”

It is due to report back in February and I hope its findings can feed into the LASPO review. It will most definitely not follow the example of the UK Government in introducing LASPO, despite the suggestions made by the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock. The one thing I am absolutely confident about is that those reforms have a greater chance of success, because they start from a strong place and they will be informed by evidence and engagement rather than the product of a simple austerity drive. That is the key flaw in LASPO, and it is why this Government should rip it up and start again.

3.28 pm

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) on securing this important debate. He made an excellent speech. The Government’s approach to access to justice is a marker of the way they view the poorest and most vulnerable in our society. Though I am relatively new to this brief, some would say I am lucky—or unlucky—to have so many former lawyers on my own side. Regardless of expertise, what unites us in the Labour party is that we all believe that no matter how much someone earns, what their background is or where they come from, our justice system should be there for them when they are at their most vulnerable.

The truth is that the changes to legal aid mean that there is now one rule for the rich and another for the poor. Those with money can pay for justice; those without are forced to represent themselves, or give up on justice altogether. That was at the crux of the argument made by my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith), who said it is just not a just society if it operates like that. If someone has been a victim of discrimination at work, has had their benefits wrongly sanctioned and faces losing their home, or is fighting a bitter custody battle, the very last thing they have the energy for is fighting a lengthy battle to get legal representation or, worse, representing themselves in court.

Earlier this year, the Labour party’s review of legal aid, chaired by Lord Willy Bach, found a system that was fundamentally broken. My hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) detailed many of the Bach commission’s recommendations. In particular, the Opposition are concerned about the impact changes have had on victims, particularly the most vulnerable such as children and victims of domestic abuse; the knock-on impact on access to justice more broadly, even for areas of law still within the scope of legal aid; and the human and financial cost of LASPO.

Legal professionals have warned of a sharp rise in the number of people forced to represent themselves in court to access the justice they deserve. The Public and Commercial Services Union has warned that aggression towards court staff is rising because people are left to navigate the complex legal and court system on their own and without support. Recently, BuzzFeed reported that a grandmother in Gloucester had to represent herself in court to prevent her grandchild from being put up for adoption, because legal aid is no longer available for family law. She was told it would cost her between £10,000 and £12,000—her entire income for a year—in court fees if she paid for legal representation herself. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) said, there are desperate cases like that coming through surgeries because, as he put it, “There is nowhere else to go.” Will the Minister confirm what the rise in litigants in person has been since the introduction of the LASPO Act?

Perhaps the most concerning aspect of the rise in people having to represent themselves is its impact on victims of abuse. It is well known that abusers will use the court system to continue their abuse. Imagine having the courage to leave an abusive relationship—to uproot the kids and start life over—only to find five years later that that abuser is taking you to court to claim visiting rights to the children. Now imagine being told that you are not eligible for legal aid and you have a choice: go to court and represent yourself and your children, allowing your abuser to sit opposite you in court while their lawyer talks about your fitness to be a parent and even cross-examines you, or give in, give up and allow him to have contact with your kids. That is the choice women have faced because of the legal aid changes brought in by this Government.

Those changes include stringent evidence tests requiring victims to prove they have been a victim of abuse to qualify for legal aid, and a time limit on the validity of that evidence. Some women have even reported being charged up to £175 by their doctor to provide that evidence. Charities such as Rights of Women and Women’s Aid warned that these tests could rule out as many as 40% of domestic violence victims from being eligible for legal aid, and the High Court agreed, demanding that the Government remove the time limit. It has been 21 months since that ruling, yet we are still waiting for reform.

Last month, I wrote to the Justice Secretary asking for the date when changes would be introduced. I am still waiting. Will the Minister confirm now, on the record, when the Government will introduce these long overdue reforms, which organisations they have consulted in preparing the new regulations and whether they will be scrapping fees for obtaining prescribed evidence such as a doctor’s letter or police disclosure? Victims of domestic violence deserve peace of mind and justice.

It is not just within areas of law removed from the scope of legal aid where justice is being denied. According to the Law Commission, advice deserts have opened up across areas of the country because huge cuts to legal aid law have forced providers and law centres to close their doors. My hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) made the point that that is happening
alongside cuts to local government and citizens advice bureaux, so people really struggle to get the advice they need. In response to my question, the Government admitted that the number of legal aid providers has fallen by 20% since the introduction of LASPO.

Ms Buck: Is my hon. Friend also aware that, as has been mentioned by some colleagues, many providers are making excessive personal sacrifices to try to keep some of these services on the road? I am aware of a provider in my constituency where staff have gone without wages for a month in the year to try to keep a service functioning. Those services, and those individuals who are bearing that burden as providers, need to be given praise and credit for their commitment.

Gloria De Piero: I will happily give praise and credit, in particular to the people my hon. Friend mentions, but what sort of society is it where those people are having to make choices like that? I thank her for that intervention.

The number of applicants for civil legal aid for domestic violence cases such as protection orders—technically still within the scope of legal aid—has fallen by 20% since 2011-12. The number of domestic violence incidents has risen in that time, so we can only assume that that fall is due to a lack of specialist legal advice. Will the Minister commit now to reviewing urgently the availability of specialist legal aid advice for victims of domestic violence to ensure no victim is put at risk by legal aid cuts?

The human cost of the LASPO Act is hard to underestimate, but perhaps the most scandalous part of this is that we now know that instead of saving money it is likely to have cost us huge sums, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East said. Last week, in response to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon), the Justice Minister revealed that the budget will have fallen in real terms by 40% since 2010-11, from £9.3 billion to £5.6 billion, which risks tipping our justice system from crisis into full-blown emergency.

This week, however, a study released by the Law Society found that the removal of access to early legal advice means many more cases are ending up in lengthy court hearings rather than being resolved beforehand. Last month—I make no apologies for repeating this point—the new President of the Supreme Court, Lady Justice Hale, said LASPO cuts are likely to prove “a false economy” because removal of access to early legal advice means people cannot resolve legal problems out of court, which places more pressure on courts. According to the PCS union the rise in litigants in person and failure to access early legal advice are leading to lengthy court delays.

In fact, the Government have already acknowledged that removal of early legal advice is a false economy. Last month, their post-legislative memorandum submitted to the Justice Committee admitted that legal aid cuts have led to the number of families and couples seeking mediation rather than court settlements dropping off a cliff. Labour is committed to immediately re-establishing entitlements to early legal advice in family courts once in government. Will the Minister confirm whether the Government plan to do the same, and will he confirm what assessment the Government have made of the associated costs of their cuts to legal aid?

We welcome the announcement of a review of the impact of LASPO, but for many victims this is five years too late, and without a clear timetable or commitment to act on recommendations, how can victims have the assurance they need that things will change? Will the Minister confirm on what date the review will conclude, which organisations the Government will consult as part of the review and when the Government plan to introduce any recommendations?

We might never know how many families have faced destitution or how many victims have given up on justice altogether as a result of those cuts. I hope the Government take seriously the concerns of service providers, legal professionals, court staff and victims themselves, and act to restore access to justice for some of the most vulnerable in our society.

3.37 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Dominic Raab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Robertson. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) for securing this debate and for his powerful, tenacious speech.

One thing we all agree on at least as a matter of principle, is that legal aid is a fundamental pillar of access to justice. Last year, the Ministry of Justice spent £1.6 billion on legal aid in England and Wales, which accounts for more than a fifth of the Ministry’s budget. The Government have a responsibility to make sure that those in the greatest hardship, at the times of greatest need, can secure access to justice, that the most vulnerable are catered for, and that the resources are made available to do that. That is a responsibility that we take very seriously.

As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, legal aid in Scotland is a devolved matter. I appreciate that in this debate he has not talked a lot about that. It is also devolved in Northern Ireland. I can address the provision of legal aid in only England and Wales, for which we are responsible. The hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kirkintilloch and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) raised this in relation to spending, but I would note that the Council of Europe’s most recent survey post-LASPO found that spending on legal aid per person in England and Wales was the highest of all Council of Europe members. The hon. Gentleman quite fairly made the point that we have a different system from the one used in many parts of continental Europe. Of course, the Council of Europe survey also looks at the spending per capita in Scotland, and in England and Wales it is 13% higher. Neither he nor the hon. Member for Glasgow North East touched on that, for all their critique of the system in England and Wales.

Stuart C. McDonald: In fairness, I did touch on that by mentioning the fact that Alan Paterson highlighted the higher per capita spending in England and Wales compared with Scotland. He said that the reason for that was Scotland’s greater success in reducing the cost of courts, so the total bill was made smaller not by excluding folk from the scope of legal aid but by making courts less expensive to run.

Dominic Raab: I welcome the hon. Gentleman’s intervention and hope he accepts the figure showing that the spending in England and Wales per capita is
13% higher. I agree with him on a point that the hon. Member for Glasgow North East did not take up: this is not just about how much money is spent, but about how the resources are allocated. Indeed, the question of access to justice is broader than purely the administration or funding of legal aid, so on that point, I accept what he said.

In truth, the legal aid scheme has been the subject of regular change since its inception. Spending has increased substantially, and all Administrations—Labour, the coalition, and Conservative—have sought to exercise control over spending in recent times. I think we all agree that we need to exercise control over legal aid and other precious public services in order to ensure that the finite, precious resources go to those who need them most.

The most recent reforms were part of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, which came in the context of huge financial pressure on the country’s finances. The reforms were founded on the principle of ensuring that legal aid continues to be available for the highest priority cases—for example, when an individual’s life or liberty is at stake, when someone suffers the loss of their home, or in domestic violence cases, or when children may be taken into care—and in achieving that, delivering better value for money for taxpayers by reducing the cost of the scheme and discouraging unnecessary litigation. Again, although this has not been mentioned today, in some cases—not all—going to court is not the right thing to do, and I will touch on that if I have time later.

I appreciate that the changes in LASPO were contentious. They were subjected to a significant amount of rigorous scrutiny at the time, as the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) said. They were debated extensively and amendments were made before the legislation was approved by Parliament. It has been several years since the implementation of those landmark reforms, so it is absolutely right to take stock. That is why we recently laid before the House a detailed, post-legislative memorandum summarising how LASPO was implemented and making a preliminary assessment of its impact. In addition, my predecessors made a commitment to the House to conduct a detailed post-implementation review of the changes to establish to what degree the reforms had achieved their objectives. It is right that we are now fulfilling that pledge.

As hon. Members have acknowledged, that appraisal will cover each issue that has been subject to a previous commitment by Ministers in this House. The Lord Chancellor recently announced the start of the process. That will be led by officials, but I am keen to listen to interested parties, including hon. Members from across the House. Given the importance of the reforms, it is right that we take time to gather the necessary evidence and views of experts on the impact of the changes.

The hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) asked me about the detail of the review. I will write to stakeholders shortly to invite them to participate in a series of expert panels to consider and sift through relevant evidence to inform our review, which will be comprehensive. I want to ensure that we get the review right. Of course, I will not pre-empt or prejudice the outcome by making an announcement at this stage, but I am sure she expected me to say that—but we will publish our findings by the summer recess. One or two hon. Members asked about that.

We must acknowledge that the financial pressures in which the LASPO reforms were introduced remain with us today. The proportion of departmental spend on legal aid remains broadly the same today as it was prior to 2010. We in the Government have the responsibility to ensure that taxpayers get the best value for money, as well as deal with the challenges and fixing the problems of the legal aid system as and when they arise.

That is why I recently announced our changes to the fee scheme for criminal litigators in the Crown court. Defence solicitors do incredibly valuable work and we want to remunerate them fairly for it, but since 2013-14 there has been a rise of more than £30 million in the annual spend on that work. That is primarily attributable to a costs judge ruling that changed what we were paying for beyond the initial policy intention. We do not accept that that reflects an increase in the work done by defence solicitors and do not think that the rise reflects value for money for taxpayers, so it is right that we acted to address that.

We have targeted the action to the 2% of Crown court cases—the most expensive cases—in which the problem was identified. Effectively, the change involves a shift in policy so that more remuneration is for work that is actually done and not just for the amount of paperwork that is produced in court. It is absolutely right that solicitors are properly paid for work that is reasonably done through the scheme. At the same time, as the quid pro quo for putting the proper reforms in place to ensure that the precious, finite resources go to those with the greatest need, we announced our intention not to pursue the suspended 8.75% fee cut, which would have affected all solicitors. Those two parts of the jigsaw will make sure that we get this right. As I mentioned, this is not just about the money that goes in, but about ensuring that we get the best use out of it.

The hon. Member for Westminster North raised the issue of domestic violence, as did the shadow justice Minister, the hon. Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero). Domestic violence is absolutely abhorrent; it appals every one of us in this place, I am sure, and it is an absolute priority for this Government. We are completely clear that genuine victims of domestic violence and abuse must have access to the help that they need, including access to legal aid. That is why we retained legal aid for protective injunctions. Legal aid was granted in more than 12,000 protective injunction cases last year. In addition, in cases involving child arrangements and financial matters, funding is available for those who will be disadvantaged by facing their abuser in court.

As the hon. Lady mentioned, we are considering the findings of the further internal review of the evidence requirements. I will make an announcement on that shortly, which I am confident—or at least, I hope—will receive support from all parts of the House. She also asked who would be consulted. That is of the greatest importance and we are working very hard to get this right. The kind of shape envisaged by Rights of Women, Resolution, Women’s Aid and the Law Society, so that we can be confident that we are doing everything we can to protect and support genuine victims.

Although it is right to ensure that those who are most in need of legal aid are able to access it, we should acknowledge that the courts are not going to be the right solution in non-domestic violence cases in other areas. I am thinking particularly of some family law
disputes, which the hon. Lady mentioned. In many family law cases, the challenge is to see them not go to court. I accept the point about mediation not being as successful as was hoped, but the answer is to try and revive the efforts to achieve greater use of alternative dispute resolution in some cases. That is not just because of the financial implications, but because of the trauma of going to court—not for lawyers, but for the many people affected by such cases. I think that needs to be emphasised.

We need to do more to promote alternative dispute resolution, so we have protected legal help in many cases. Last year, we spent £100 million on early legal advice and assistance in civil and family cases. In other areas, we have introduced a telephone helpline to provide legal advice in certain categories of case to allow individuals to access advice quickly and easily. Last year, there were more than 20,000 instances of advice being obtained usefully and helpfully through that system. We have also developed a user-friendly digital tool—as the world becomes more digital, it is right that the justice system strives to catch up—to make it clear to people when legal aid is available to them.

When an alternative route is more appropriate, people should feel empowered to pursue it without having to find a lawyer at great expense, whether that is to themselves or the taxpayer. For instance, in cases involving separating couples, mediation can be less stressful and quicker than going to court, and it is often far cheaper than using a lawyer. Critically, it can help to reduce conflict after separation and the trauma of that, often on both sides, which in some cases litigation will make worse, not better.

The Government are committed to promoting mediation and its benefits, and legal aid remains available for these cases. In the 12 months to June 2017, a full or partial agreement was reached in 62% of publicly funded cases in which both parties engaged in mediation. Of course, as hon. Members have mentioned, citizens can and do represent themselves in court, in some cases irrespective of whether legal aid is available or whether they are privately funded. Litigants in person are not a new phenomenon; mediation can be less stressful and quicker than going to court, and it is often far cheaper than using a lawyer. Critically, it can help to reduce conflict after separation and the trauma of that, often on both sides, which in some cases litigation will make worse, not better.

The Government are committed to promoting mediation and its benefits, and legal aid remains available for these cases. In the 12 months to June 2017, a full or partial agreement was reached in 62% of publicly funded cases in which both parties engaged in mediation. Of course, as hon. Members have mentioned, citizens can and do represent themselves in court, in some cases irrespective of whether legal aid is available or whether they are privately funded. Litigants in person are not a new feature of our justice system. People involved in litigation are engaged in a variety of disputes and have a wide range of needs and capabilities. We recognise that for some people, representing themselves in court is purely a matter of choice, but for others it can be very challenging and demanding.

Bambos Charalambous: Is the Minister aware that there is a piece in this week’s Law Society Gazette about rewriting civil procedure rules to accommodate litigants in person, who may not fully understand court procedures in civil proceedings?

Dominic Raab: I have not seen that article, but we are constantly looking to ensure that the court system is as amenable as it can be to litigants in person. Contrary to what the shadow Minister suggested, a range of support is available for that; we have ensured that persons without legal representation can get help and support. Since 2015, the Government have invested £5 million of funding to support litigants in person through the litigant in person support strategy, which works with a range of partners across the advice, voluntary and pro bono sectors to provide practical support, whether that is online self-help resources, access to free or affordable legal advice or representation where possible. Personal support units provide trained volunteers who give free and independent assistance to people facing proceedings without legal representation in civil and family courts and tribunals. More personal support units have opened in courts to provide direct support and information to litigants in person, and there are now 20 such centres in 16 cities.

Andy Slaughter: I hesitate to say this, but the Minister is being a bit complacent. All the organisations that he names are wholly laudable, but a PSU, for example, does not give legal advice. Pro bono services are excellent but they cannot compensate for the reduction in legal aid. Mediation is important, but there will be some cases in family law that need to go to a contested hearing. We would like to hear from the Minister that the review will look at the actual effects on the ground, and that where there is a deficit, there will be a genuine attempt to address that. Further, we are asking that he looks at the Bach commission report as part of that process.

Dominic Raab: The hon. Gentleman has made his intervention in his usual powerful way. I gave the assurance he wanted that the review would be comprehensive and I have looked at the Bach commission report. I would love to know where Opposition Members would make allocations of public funding to pay for the estimated £400 million needed to fund those reforms. On our side, we want to ensure that we can allocate legal aid as best we can, but we have to take the cost into account.

The point I was in the middle of making in relation to litigants in person was one that the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) made in his intervention. We have also delivered training to better equip the judiciary to support litigants in person through the court process.

To respond to the points made by the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves), my Department is taking steps to improve the situation of bereaved families at inquests. The inquest process is distinct; it can be incredibly traumatic for the bereaved. It is important to help them to understand how their loved ones died, which can be particularly hard so soon after the event. My heart goes out to anyone who goes through that—not just the grief but the fact-finding process, with all the legal and bureaucratic procedures of the inquest system, which must be rather daunting and challenging for a layperson. I agree that early legal advice can be helpful in allowing families to understand the process, which is why we have protected it for inquests within the scope of legal aid. Inquests are supposed to be inquisitorial, and most inquest hearings are conducted without the need for publicly funded representation. However, we recognise that legal representation may be necessary in some circumstances, for which funding is available through the exceptional case funding scheme.

Dame Elish Angiolini’s important report on deaths in custody highlighted that there are issues relating to public participation. I reviewed that report and I take it very seriously, which is why we committed to update the Lord Chancellor’s guidance so it is clear that the starting presumption is that legal aid should be awarded for representation of the families at an inquest following the non-natural death or suicide of a person detained
in custody. I hope that that goes some way to reassuring hon. Members. We could debate that important work for much longer, but I will wind up shortly.

As well as looking back over the record of LASPO and some of the previous decisions, it is also crucial to look forward and ensure that access to justice, to which legal aid makes a hugely valuable contribution, is maintained and meets the needs of a modern society. We are investing over £1 billion to transform our courts and tribunals to build on our world-renowned justice system so that it is more sensitive to victims, more modern so that it works more efficiently, swifter and more accessible in the ways that I have described. As part of that, we will digitise our services to make them easier for the public to use, whether or not they are supported by a lawyer. It is essential that we continue our work to ensure that legal aid is made available to the most vulnerable, as part of that wider approach to making access to justice and the justice system fit for the 21st century.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow North East again on securing this debate. I welcome the thoughtful contributions on all sides and the opportunity to set out the Government’s position and our plans to take the justice system forward, not back.

3.55 pm

Mr Sweeney: Thank you for your excellent chairing of the debate, Mr Robertson. It has been a great privilege to move the motion today and to call on the excellent support of my Labour colleagues, who offered their expertise, insight and personal experience of having served in the legal profession and dealt with these issues at first hand.

Most notably, my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), who chairs the all-party parliamentary group on legal aid, dealt with the issue tenaciously, making a series of observations about how it is often the most vulnerable people who are missing out on this opportunity and how early intervention is the key to success. My hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) made the point that the whole premise of the so-called reform of legal aid is wrong-headed because it drives cost into the system. We have heard that every £1 that is cut in the legal system is costing £6 in real terms down the line. I was also interested in the points made by the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald), which is nearly my neighbouring constituency. He observed that although the legal system in Scotland is not suffering from the same pernicious pressures on legal aid, it is damning it with faint praise to say that there are not challenges. I hope the review in Scotland, which is welcome, recognises that the Law Society of Scotland has identified problems and that they ought to be addressed honestly and with an open mind. I hope that will happen and that the resourcing needed to support legal aid is upheld.

I observe the lack of Conservative Members in the debate. I do not know whether that is because they are not prepared to come and defend the system or whether they do not care. I will leave that to other hon. Members to judge. The hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) made some interesting points, but he also conceded that the cost base premise of reforming legal aid was flawed and that it may well drive cost into the legal system overall, which is unhelpful even by its own standards.

The Minister’s response was also interesting. He asked where the money would come from. Actually, if the system is costing money, surely we should look at it honestly through the review process to see where efficiencies can be made. If the review is to be worth the paper it is written on, I hope the Minister will commit to ensuring that people who have experience of using legal aid are integrated into it and that their views will be part of the process. On the wider efficiency of the court system, we recognise the difference in spending in Scotland per capita. Perhaps there is an opportunity to learn lessons from the efficiency of how the overall courts process works there.

A number of considered observations have been made in the debate and I have learned a lot from taking part in it. I hope we all strive towards an aspiration to remove harm, stress and indignity from society. The legal aid process is a fundamental pillar of achieving that. As a society, I hope we move towards a system in which there is a presumption to give legal aid. There should be a presumption of entitlement to accessing legal aid rather than a presumption that people are not entitled to it; someone should not have to prove their entitlement to the court system.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the provision of legal aid.
Sanitary Products

[Mr Virendra Sharma in the Chair]

4 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the provision of sanitary products.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I am delighted to have secured this debate on an important topic that—let’s face it—remains taboo and is still a bit embarrassing for many people. It is precisely because no one wants to talk about it that I believe it is so critical that we do, so I will start by putting my money where my mouth is and telling the House one of my most embarrassing moments.

I was in the first week of a new school. I was 12. I was feeling very out of place and very lost. I saw a teacher beckoning me from the top of a stairwell. I walked towards her and said, “Yes, Miss? What did I do wrong?” I was convinced something was wrong. She said, “Don’t worry—everything’s fine, but I wanted to let you know that you have a stain of blood on your skirt.” Of course, it was not fine. I looked behind and on my light blue uniform there was indeed such a stain. My face went red, and then white. I remember going to the bathroom and crying, and when I stopped crying I called my mum. She came and we went home; I told the school that I was better prepared the next time, but for thousands of girls in this country, many people might have seen it and not said anything.

For me, that was a one-off and I was better prepared the next time, but for thousands of girls in this country, missing school because they cannot afford sanitary products is a regular occurrence. It is an outrage that in 2017 for an advert for sanitary products to show red liquid rather than blue? I assure hon. Members that it is never blue. The more we talk about periods and period poverty, the easier we will make it for young girls to talk about this.

Paula Sherriff: When I was at school and we were given a very brief talk about periods, boys were sent out of the class. It is important that menstrual health is covered in detail in statutory sex and relationships education, but does the hon. Lady agree that boys need education about periods, too? Many of them will go on to be husbands, fathers, teachers or doctors. Just as women should understand the signs of testicular cancer, men should understand about periods and period poverty.

Layla Moran: Speaking as another teacher, I completely agree. On the meagre salaries that teachers are now paid, they should not be asked to fork out themselves for sanitary products.

Many of us first realised that period poverty was such an issue for young women when it came to light that teachers in Leeds had got in touch with a charity called Freedom4Girls that provides sanitary products to women in Kenya and had asked whether it would be willing to give them a supply for girls in their school. They had noticed that girls were missing class at around the same time every month, like clockwork. Given the substitutes, including rolled-up toilet paper or old socks, that girls from low-income families are using, it is no surprise that they choose to stay home. Now, I admit that the rolled-up toilet tissue trick has served me well, but I can go and buy some products or go home. For these girls, it is a regular occurrence. It should not be.

Period poverty affects not just girls, but women. Charities and campaigners tell me that it is rife among asylum seekers, refugees, women in refuges, and indeed any vulnerable women who cannot afford to buy the products they need. As a nation we must do better, and as a society we need to get better at talking about this. Given that 52% of the population menstruate, or have done at some point, is it not ridiculous that it has taken until 2017 for an advert for sanitary products to show red liquid rather than blue? I assure hon. Members that it is never blue. The more we talk about periods and normalise what is a completely natural and healthy function, the easier we will make it for young girls to talk about this.

Paula Sherriff: I completely agree. School is exactly the right time for that education. I have delivered those lectures myself, and although they may be embarrassing for the boys, it is very important that they understand how this works, and that it is completely natural. That is the point.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Lady is absolutely right. I visited St Mungo’s last week, and that was raised as an important issue that it needs help with.

Very little research has been done on period poverty in schools in the UK, but what we do know is shocking. In a Plan International UK survey of 1,000 girls, 49% said that they had missed an entire day of school because of their period. Critically, of those, 59% had lied about
why, claiming that something else had caused their absence. Meanwhile, 82% of the girls surveyed admitted that they had hidden or concealed their sanitary products, while nearly three quarters said that they felt embarrassed even buying them. Again, I will admit to that: during the 2015 election campaign, I was approached for a chat about politics in Boots, where I had just bought some tampons. I remember standing with them behind my back because I was a bit embarrassed. I would not have done that with toothpaste. That shows how desperately we need to talk more about the issue.

Plan International’s campaign to normalise periods— including with a period emoji—is brilliant, as is all the great work that businesses and charities are doing up and down the country. Boots and others have introduced drop-in donation points. Bodyform has promised to donate 200,000 packs of sanitary products by 2020. There are grassroots campaigns such as the Periodical Diary, which has a website on which girls can talk frankly about their periods; it also goes into schools and delivers workshops. However, we should not leave it to charities and business to pick up the Government’s slack. How can it be okay for a mother to be forced to choose between food and sanitary products? That is exactly the choice that far too many women in this country face.

I was disappointed that the Chancellor did not make funding available in last week’s Budget to ensure that schools could stock sanitary products for those who need them. Let us focus on that small issue. Such a small, simple step would restore dignity, save embarrassment and reduce the number of girls who are missing valuable days of teaching and learning.

It is not too late. The Minister could offer something to these desperate women. I hope that she and others are feeling the political pressure mount. Last year, the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) tabled amendments to the Finance Bill that were rejected by the Government—shamefully, I might add. I thank and commend her for her excellent work on the issue. In March, the Education Secretary—who is also Minister for Women and Equalities, as we have already been reminded—said in answer to the then Liberal Democrat MP for Leeds North West, Greg Mulholland, that she would look at the issue of period poverty “carefully”. I look forward to an update from the Minister on where that assessment is, and when the Government plan to publish their work.

I also ask the Minister: did this issue even get a mention in the discussions with the Treasury over the last weeks and months? I sincerely hope that we will not be spun the line that the reallocation of money from VAT on sanitary products to women’s charities is enough, because it is not.

Paula Sherriff: I thank the hon. Lady for her honesty in the story that she told. I was once a young girl at school, and the situation she described would have filled me with horror. I would also have been in the lavatories weeping. I will deal with the issue of poverty and sanitary products in a minute, but while it is a shame that we have not made as much progress as all that, I think back to when I was first elected in 2005, when hon. Members would have been in the lavatories weeping. I will not be passed on to schools. Yes, schools have budgets, but those budgets are ever squeezed, and schools still need to find a further £1.7 billion, according to the National Audit Office. I ask the Minister not to pass the buck today on this issue, and to find the small amount of new money that is needed to fund these very important initiatives. Period poverty is a hidden plight, and it is time that it was taken seriously by all. I thank all Members in advance for their contributions, and of course I thank the Minister, who I have much respect for, for listening intently to the arguments put forward in the short time that we have.

4.11 pm

The Minister for Women (Anne Milton): It is a pleasure to serve under you today, Mr Sharma; I do not think that we have done so before.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) on securing this debate. She is absolutely right that this topic remains taboo. I think we can go back 1,000, 2,000 or 3,000 years to find some of the origins of the taboo. Even today, some of the cultural issues around women and menstruation are still very strong and not what we would want to see, certainly in this country.

I thank the hon. Lady for her honesty in the story that she told. I was once a young girl at school, and the situation she described would have filled me with horror. I would also have been in the lavatories weeping. I will deal with the issue of poverty and sanitary products in a minute, but while it is a shame that we have not made as much progress as all that, I think back to when I was first elected in 2005, when hon. Members would have been a bit aghast at us even mentioning the word “period” or “menstruation”, so maybe we have made some progress. It is good to see two men in the Chamber—my hon. Friends the Members for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant), and for Thornbury and Yate (Luke Hall)—because this is not just a women’s issue. It is also about men.

Period poverty has been the subject of quite a lot of media and parliamentary attention in recent months; I know that the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) put a question on it to the Minister for Women and Equalities. In general terms, we are clear that no person should be held back by their gender or background, and if someone cannot attend school on the days that they are having a period, it is much harder for them to reach their potential. They are missing out on valuable school time.

On school absences, the evidence is quite clear. We have all seen that every day of school missed can alter a pupil’s chances of achieving good GCSE results and have a lasting effect on their life chances. It is important to say that in this context. That is why we have made it a priority to reduce school absence. There has been some
success, with overall yearly absence rates decreasing from 6.5% of possible sessions missed in 2006-07 to 4.6% in 2015-16, which is quite a marked drop. In the context of this debate, it is interesting and perhaps surprising to note that in 2015-16, the absence rates for boys and girls were almost identical, with boys missing, on average, 4.6% of possible sessions and girls missing 4.5%.

Paula Sherriff: The Minister agrees that this is a taboo subject—she is absolutely right—but it seems as if the Government have prevented us from talking about it during the passage of the Finance Bill by refusing to table the normal motions. Can she assure us that the Government will allow us to address this issue directly in the House, because we have been prevented from doing so thus far?

Anne Milton: With the greatest respect, I do not know this, because I have not looked into it, but I would imagine that that was not to do with the subject. I have no doubt that the Government were not unhappy to discuss periods; we are having this debate today, so there is no question of that. I have no doubt that there are other reasons for what she describes. I am sure that if the hon. Lady made representations to the Backbench Business Committee, it would accept a proposal for a debate on this subject. It is also open to her party to put this forward as the subject of an Opposition day debate—there is an Opposition day debate today.

There is no question of anybody—certainly not me, as Minister for Women—suppressing any debate about periods; the more we talk about these issues, the more we lessen the taboo. If we cannot talk about them here, how can we expect children to talk about them in school?

We need to look into those absence rates further. Also, not being able to afford sanitary protection does not necessarily mean being absent from school; the two do not necessarily correlate. In fact, if the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon is suggesting that that is the reason why many girls are missing school, it is of note that the girls’ absence rate is still lower than that for boys. As I say, we need to do a lot of research on this, and I know that the Minister for Women and Equalities is very keen for that to take place. The boys’ lavatories in particular were a place where boys’ heads were shoved down the lavatory at regular and frequent intervals, and the girls’ loos were a place where a lot of bullying took place. That has got worse, not better, which is worrying, if we consider all the guidance that has been produced for schools and the fact that we should be a more progressive and open-minded society. I am probably a great deal older than many other Members in the Chamber today, and it feels as though the situation has got worse; it feels regressive, including with respect to taboo.

Interestingly, I saw online a story about Sally Ride, the first American woman in space, that showed just how ignorant people are. She was asked if 100 tampons was the right number for a one-week mission. It is quite extraordinary that people in NASA had no idea—no more than a lot of other people—about this issue.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): Although this is a very serious subject, I will raise a smile and share an event with Members. It is to do with the taboo and the lack of awareness, particularly among males. As a father, I was encouraging my oldest daughter to go to her swimming club one night. We had a great exchange of views, but how embarrassed was I when I found out the reason why she was not going? I felt so small, and I was an adult. Both the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) and the Minister are absolutely right about the taboo, and that the subject is one that a parent of a 10 or 11-year-old girl has to understand; indeed, I am the father of two girls and we have had a number of these experiences. Promoting awareness and talking about this is helpful, although that does not excuse the poverty aspect and the need to provide young girls with the products that we are discussing. That is a male contribution, to balance the conversation.

Anne Milton: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I particularly commend him on being here, because it shows that we are all prepared to talk about the issue.

Sex and relationships education and religious education definitely came up as issues. We need to do a great deal more to educate young people about the alternatives. Mooncups are one option; I should think that a lot of people do not know about them. There are alternatives.

Paula Sherriff: I am having a CupAware party here in Parliament in January. I agree that they are a fantastic sustainable solution, although they are not for everyone. Will the Minister join me at that CupAware party? Will she also join us at the period poverty march in Westminster on 20 December? Parliament is sitting that day, and I am speaking at that event. I hope the Minister will come along and listen to people who have been affected.

Anne Milton: I know it is against the rules of the Chamber, but please indulge me, Mr Sharma; I am going to place a Mooncup on the desk. They were invented after I stopped having periods, but I should be able to talk—
Mr Virendra Sharma (in the Chair): Order. It may be best if the Minister puts the item away.

Anne Milton: Sorry, Mr Sharma. I will put it back in my handbag. I do not go on marches as a point of principle, but I will be interested in the feedback of the hon. Member for Dewsbury from that event. I do not feel under political pressure, because although we may argue about welfare benefits and poverty—we obviously do—and the route out of those things, we do not disagree on periods and sex education. It should be noted that the Department for Education does not issue specific guidance to schools on the provision of sanitary protection, but it is without doubt the case, and always has been the case, that the school office will have supplies for children who are caught short.

Layla Moran: Will the Minister give way?

Anne Milton: If I give way now, I will not have time to make all my points. I ask the hon. Lady to bear with me for a minute.

Members are aware of the long-running campaign for sanitary products to be exempt from VAT and the Government’s commitment to zero-rate such products once our leaving the EU offers us the discretion to do so. There are good and bad sides to Brexit, and that is perhaps one of the good sides. In anticipation of that development, we set up the £15-million tampon tax fund, which is equivalent to the amount of VAT paid on sanitary products each year. The hon. Member for Dewsbury raised an issue about one of the organisations, but I was not involved in that. The majority of funding has been grants to frontline charities that aim to improve the lives of disadvantaged women and girls. Those charities include health, wellbeing and education initiatives and support services for vulnerable women. I understand that some of the money has gone to women’s refuges. As a former health professional, I can say how superb some of those organisations’ work is. While the tampon tax fund is not currently open for applications, we can look forward to updates on that in the near future.

More generally, I have to talk a bit about poverty. I have talked about periods, and poverty is the other side of the issue. We know that children do worse in households where no one is in work. Children in such households are five times more likely to be in poverty than those in households where all adults work. They are also almost twice as likely to fail at all stages of their education than children in working families. The number of households where no one is working is just short of being 1 million lower than it was in 2010, which means that there are 608,000 fewer children in such households than seven years ago.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Anne Milton: I have seven minutes left, so I will not at the moment. I will give way if I have a bit of time at the end.

We have increased the national living wage, which means that a full-time worker is now £1,400 a year better off. We have increased the personal allowance again, meaning that a basic rate taxpayer is now £1,000 better off than they would have been in 2010. We have doubled the childcare entitlement for working parents of three and four-year-olds in England from 15 to 30 hours, introduced tax-free childcare and supported the right to request flexible working, which enables parents to arrange care in a way that works for them. We have a returner programme going on. It is easy to dismiss all that in the arguments that we want to have across the House on benefits, but it is important to recognise that those measures will make a difference to those families.

Layla Moran: On the point of money, this is a women-only issue, pretty much by definition; does the Minister not agree that we need new money to tackle the problem? It is all very well us all agreeing with each other, but without the new money, we are not going to get where we need to go.

Anne Milton: What we need is credible and robust evidence about the issue. There are a number of other issues, such as young men in school who possibly have to be clean shaven. There is an issue about razors for boys, which are very expensive. They are probably the item in the supermarket that is more frequently shoplifted than anything else. As a former public health Minister, I know that toothpaste is an issue. People with low incomes are perhaps not spending money on toothpaste when they should. There is a clear correlation between that and dental caries, given the fluoride in toothpaste. There are a number of issues. What things are families doing without because they feel that their finances are too tight for them to afford them? Sanitary products are separate, inasmuch as they are a sensitive issue that can increase the stigma that young women face about their menstrual cycle and their reproductive system. I accept that there are additional issues there, but sanitary products are not the only issue.

It is important to find out about school absences and how many children are not buying sanitary protection because they feel too poor to do so. Only then can we think about possible solutions. I thank Members for attending. I am sure that this will not be the last time that we discuss periods. SRE and RE are critical. What matters to me is that we have lessons that include boys and girls, because it is important for boys to understand. It is important to debunk some of the myths that some makers of sanitary products exploit. Saying that sanitary products are meant to keep someone odour-free is complete nonsense. There is no specific odour associated with menstrual blood; it is not like anything else.

There is a great deal more that we should do. Young boys need to hear about menstruation in the same way that young girls do, but I also feel strongly that young girls need an opportunity to have structured discussions on their own, without boys present, for the simple reason that someone going through puberty might feel very uncomfortable discussing things in front of people of a different gender.

I thank you again, Mr Sharma, for your excellent chairmanship, and for bearing with me when I produced an item in the Chamber. I thank the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon for securing this debate and everyone for their contributions.

Question put and agreed to.
Dark Sky Status (Cornwall)

4.29 pm

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Cornwall’s dark skies status.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma.

As many hon. Members know, Cornwall is a beautiful place. Just saying “Cornwall” brings up pictures of a fantastic rugged coastline, the beauty of the moors, and of course our mining history, which made Cornwall a world heritage site—but also beautiful are Cornwall’s skies at night. I was just six years old when President Kennedy said, in an inspiring speech:

“We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills”.

When I was about seven, my cousin Dawn used to take me out into the garden and point out the different stars to me. She pointed out the great bear, the little bear and the constellation, and I found it fascinating. I was just a teenager when mankind landed on the moon, and I remember Neil Armstrong taking his first steps when I was at school. I remember the roads being blocked in Cornwall as it hosted viewers of a solar eclipse in 1999—my young son became very excited about it. People looked skywards, with the correct eye protection of course, to see our skies go dark in the morning.

Those memories were brought back to me when I met with Ken and Muriel Bennett from the fantastic Caradon observatory on Bodmin moor. Their enthusiasm about the sky at night is fantastic and infectious. I would like to read a quick endorsement from space pilot Rick Hauck, who just happens to be the uncle of one of my local councillors in South East Cornwall. He said:

“Congratulations to those who have successfully obtained certification of International Dark Sky status for Bodmin Moor. Having observed the night sky from the space shuttle, well above sky pollution suffered by a large percentage of inhabited earth, I can assure the stargazers in the Moor and particularly those fortunate enough to have access to the Caradon Observatory that they will have a unique view of the night sky, breathtaking in its grandeur.”

Caradon observatory is an amateur-run facility near Upton Cross in my constituency. The observatory has been used as a venue for a number of presentations and open days for students and local groups. The facility inspires the next generation to reach for the stars. That is why I was thrilled when Bodmin moor was formally recognised by the International Dark-Sky Association as the first dark sky park in an area of outstanding natural beauty. In total, it covers an area of 80 square miles, with a buffer zone of about two miles. The bid was made by the Caradon observatory, with the assistance of Cornwall Council. I would like to put on record my thanks to the council for all the work that it carried out to achieve that status.

The exceptional quality of the night sky, commitments to avoid light pollution and the provision of educational outreach were the reasons the award was given. Local residents and businesses are also playing their part. Guidance is being offered in the designated area to help them to choose any lighting, so that the skies can be even better in future. They are also being asked to consider whether they need lighting, and to think twice before putting lighting up.

It is not just people in the area who will enjoy the dark skies. For millions of years, plant and animal life has relied on the daily rhythm of light and dark—it is literally written into our DNA—but humans have recently disrupted that, and it can cause problems with reproduction, nourishment, sleep and protection from predators. From sea birds that are navigating to amphibians that produce their mating calls only when it is dark, many parts of the ecosystem are being affected by light. One study estimated that millions of baby sea turtles die in Florida alone as they make their way towards the city lights at night instead of the bright horizon over the ocean. It is therefore hoped that the abundant wildlife on Bodmin moor will also benefit from the darker skies.

Ken and Muriel Bennett recently wrote to me saying:

“We at the Observatory have always believed that the younger the children that can be educated to look upwards the more impact it can have, even in some cases pointing them towards the sciences and suchlike. Children generally are infatuated with subjects such as dinosaurs and space travel (Star Wars for instance) and this interest starts at extremely early ages. To be able to promote astronomy as a community, or indeed as a county, would act as a further inspiration to them and hopefully steer them towards academia. We are going to need more and more scientists, engineers etc to fill increasingly technical and development positions and perhaps the earliest and best way forward is to inspire the young.”

They continued:

“Together with Cornwall council we have provided the tools to use at no costs to businesses to initially rack up the tourism in Cornwall all the year around. This will create wealth for spin off businesses, and as we become more and more known as a centre for astronomy and science, we would hope to encourage technical and engineering companies to look at starting up or relocating in our wonderful part of the country. We could produce a young labour force second to none.”

I want to see much more made of the dark sky status. I want to help Ken and Muriel with their inspirational project.

I thank the Campaign to Protect Rural England for the interest it has shown in dark skies. In its mapping, it found that around only a fifth of England is free of light pollution. It recommends that the Government ensure that local authorities are implementing Government policy to control light pollution, as set out in the national planning policy framework and associated guidance. In the absence of resources for the Departments for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and for Communities and Local Government to pursue rigorous monitoring, it calls on Ministers to issue a clear statement on how local authorities should proactively take action to control light pollution and protect dark skies in their areas.

I back Ken and Muriel in their call. In particular, I ask the Government what additional information they can make available for businesses and people to help with their lighting. I also ask what grants are available if dark sky lighting is more expensive than other alternatives—especially for people who live in designated dark sky areas, such as Bodmin moor in my constituency.

I would also be grateful if the Minister outlined what help the Government could offer Ken and Muriel to help them with their project. The equipment they need to look up into space is not cheap. I would like to think
that we could help with that, and with the facilities at the site, so that children can make the very best of their visit, inspiring them to go further and take up science.

Just last week in the Budget, the Chancellor made much of his welcome boost and long-term support for science and innovation. He mentioned skills and jobs for the new economy. It is hoped that Cornwall will deliver the UK’s first space port in 2020. Its website boasts that Cornwall Airport Newquay and Goonhilly Earth Station are well placed to play a critical role in developing the UK's space industry with the creation of a space port. Together, they provide a complete end-to-end UK launch capability to support all aspects of launch, including sub-orbital vehicles and systems and the ability to put satellites into Earth orbit. We need observatories such as the one at Caradon to inspire youngsters into our space industry. This is clearly a new economy, and we need to expand the facilities to ensure we have the workforce we need to make the UK a world leader in this field.

What Government help is available to encourage people to visit dark sky status areas? Cornwall is reliant on tourism, and our skies are our greatest asset. What assistance is there to promote our wonderful night sky to people as another reason to come to Cornwall and enjoy our wonderful hospitality?

Like many other people in London, when I am here I look up but see very little. I encourage everyone to visit my beautiful constituency and to look up at night. I promise that the view is very different. Let us make a real push to inspire people into the new economy. Let us take Bodmin moor’s dark skies—a real asset—and make people look up and think, “Where next?”

4.42 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) on securing this debate and on giving us the opportunity to talk about Cornwall. I extend the invitation much further than east Cornwall, right down to west Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, which are darker still in lots of ways.

Cornwall is already one of the darkest areas in England. It is well documented that becoming a dark skies reserve has positive effects, including energy reduction and a boost to tourism. It also improves wellbeing—first, for mankind, as it is proven that people sleep better under dark skies, and secondly, for migrating birds, nocturnal animals and mammals. My constituency, like much of Cornwall, has a track record of caring for the environment and wildlife. An example we are proud of is the seabird recovery project on Scilly, where we have supported and increased the population of the Manx shearwater, of which I am a species champion, and other seabirds by getting rid of rats and litter. That is one example of our commitment to create the best possible environment for wildlife and nature.

What interests me most about the dark skies status proposal is the west Cornwall and Isles of Scilly initiative, which will create a protected area from Bishop’s Rock, 45 km of the south-western tip of Cornwall, right through to the Hayle river, covering the Isles of Scilly and most of what we know as west Penwith. The Lizard peninsula is also in my constituency but is not included in the current proposal for dark skies reserve status, for understandable reasons—there are a couple of rather large towns between Lizard and west Penwith. However, I intend to do what I can to explore that ambition for the good people of the Lizard peninsula.

I am grateful for this debate, because this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. We already live in an unspoiled dark skies area down in the far south-west; we just do not have official recognition.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) on securing this debate. I want to give an example of something that has happened elsewhere that is similar to what she is trying to achieve. When I saw that this issue was in Westminster Hall for debate, right away I thought of the Wild Atlantic Way, which is something we have done in Northern Ireland with Tourism Ireland. We have promoted the tourism qualities while preserving the rocks, the coastline, the birds and everything else. We have sold it across the world and in the USA. A large number of visitors come not just to the Wild Atlantic Way but to the whole of Ireland and Northern Ireland. It is a marvellous thing. If she gets the status, she will get the visitors.

Derek Thomas: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. If he is offering an opportunity to take some of those American tourists from Ireland to west Cornwall, I would be absolutely delighted.

We live in an unspoiled dark area, so achieving the status would not necessarily require significant changes to light pollution levels today. The many people who are working hard to achieve the dark skies reserve, including my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall and others in west Cornwall, are seeking to preserve and protect the current situation for future generations, but there are plans to build 19,000 new homes in Cornwall and carry out a number of road and other infrastructure projects. That is why it is so important that we secure dark skies status—it is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

In February, I supported the efforts to achieve dark skies status with a constituency-wide survey. Over 95% of those who responded supported the ambition of the dark skies initiative and the work that the working group is doing, as does the Campaign to Protect Rural England, Exeter University, which delivers education in parts of Cornwall, the National Trust, Penwith Landscape Partnership, the Isles of Scilly Wildlife Trust, the Council of the Isles of Scilly, the Duchy of Cornwall, Cornwall Council and the diocese of Truro. A couple of names have been mentioned. I would like to mention Kevin Hughes, a constituent of mine, who been a long-time avid campaigner to deliver dark skies designation in west Cornwall and Scilly. Together, we are united to keep Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly special.

When we secure dark skies reserve status, we will further improve our offer to tourists and our care for the environment and wildlife habitats, and we will lead the way in striking the balance and finding the harmony needed not by resisting house building but by ensuring that the built environment complements the largely unspoiled beauty of the county of Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly. That is what exercises the minds and energies of large numbers of Cornish residents.
When preparing for this debate, I was sent some fantastic images of the skies above Cornwall at night. It is regrettable that I cannot share them in the Chamber, but hon. Members can view them, along with the 9,805 people who have already done so, on the Dark Skies for West Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly Facebook page.

4.48 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma, and to speak in this debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) on securing it. It is a debate in which we can enjoy each other’s company for an hour. We are probably all going to say broadly similar things.

The hon. Lady talked about going out stargazing in her childhood, and the wonder and awe that that produced in her. It is something I thoroughly enjoy doing with my two girls. When I take them only a few miles out with the city of Glasgow—I will say a bit more about Glasgow in a minute or two—vistas suddenly appear in front of us that are not visible in the city. It is great for them to start picking out the different constellations and to see familiar things. For example, Orion is visible in the city, but there is far more detail when we go out of the city.

The hon. Lady talked about the 1999 eclipse in Cornwall. I travelled to Cornwall especially for it. My son was just a toddler at the time, and we camped in a muddy field somewhere in Cornwall. We could not get near the beaches the next morning—it was too busy—so we stayed in rural Cornwall and, because of cloud cover, saw nothing. We enjoyed our experience very much.

In 2015, there was an eclipse in the UK. I am not talking about the SNP’s general election victory, but a partial eclipse that was visible. Shortly before I was elected, I was a physics teacher. We took the students outside and they were able to watch the eclipse. There is something about space and the universe—when we can see things working other than just the normal that we are used to—that really inspires our young people. During my time as a teacher, I often had young people out doing Duke of Edinburgh expeditions, not in Cornwall but usually in the highlands of Scotland, and usually in the rain and the mud, but very occasionally in beautifully spectacular countryside, where the sun would set and the stars appear.

Many of those Glaswegian school children had never been outside the city. It was quite incredible for them suddenly to see the stars appearing. We said to them, “There’s Orion. We’re used to seeing Orion, but have you ever seen the redness of Betelgeuse that you can now see? Have you ever counted the number of stars on Orion’s sword?” Things like that made it far more alive for them.

We must not underestimate the impact that these experiences have on young people, so it is wonderful to hear that Bodmin Moor has been designated an international dark sky landscape. I really hope that the wider community in Cornwall and the community of Bodmin Moor can take full advantage of the educational experiences that that offers the young people there.

In Scotland, we have three designated dark sky areas—Moffat, Galloway and Coll—but one could argue that most of Scotland is a dark sky area, because just a short distance from the major cities the stars really are spectacular. I believe that the designation is to do with how many stars can be seen and light levels; I have not fully read up on how somewhere can be designated a dark sky area, I must admit. I know when I am somewhere dark when I can see the Milky Way, which is often invisible to us. The problem in Scotland can be the cloud cover, which might be a problem in Cornwall—I think they suffer a bit from clouds, too. We do not always get the beautifully clear skies that we need to see things.

There are lots of advantages to being designated as having dark sky status, one of which is tourism, which has been mentioned. Cornwall already has a fairly vibrant tourist industry, but there are other things that we can do not just in Cornwall but across the UK to help to generate the tourist economy. One relates to VAT on tourism. I am glad that the Minister is in her place and I hope that she is listening. Reducing VAT would be a shot in the arm to many small businesses across tourist areas: bed and breakfasts, restaurants, guesthouses, visitor centres, shops and more. What a difference it would make if that could be considered.

The hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) talked about biodiversity, the improvement in wildlife that he has seen in his area and the different schemes that have been used. Protection for the environment is important. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about the wild Atlantic way, which I had not heard about but I have just googled, so I know the details, and I will be sure to read up on it for my next visit to Ireland.

Light pollution is something that we need to think about seriously, both in rural areas where it affects the natural environment and in cities. I said that I would talk a little more about cities. Recently, Glasgow underwent a programme of changing from orange sodium lights, which pretty much sent out light in all directions, to far more directed LED lights, which shine down but not up. That irradiance is quite important—not so much in the city, although I have certainly noticed a difference in the number of stars that are visible now. The difference can be seen out of the city or town areas, because there is not the same light pollution a few miles out of town as we are used to in it. As a child, I knew that I was approaching Glasgow when I was 30 or 40 miles away when I saw the infamous sodium glow of the city. The LEDs do not produce quite as much glow, so they are quite important. In the city, we can now see far more constellations. It is great that my two daughters, who are only eight and 10, can now point out far more detail in constellations they see from the back garden and pick out constellations that they could identify previously only when they were in rural areas.

I want to come back to something that the hon. Member for South East Cornwall said: the importance of inspiring and encouraging young people to study these subjects. I am a physicist by profession, although my background is in photonics, not astronomy. The space industry is at a point where interest in it is ready to explode, and we need to make sure that we have the young people there to take advantage of that.

The hon. Lady mentioned the space industry and I know that she is a great advocate for it, but Glasgow is now the satellite centre of Europe. Only San Francisco produces more satellites worldwide. We have three big companies: Clyde Space, Alba Orbital and Spire Global all in the centre of Glasgow. We also have Prestwick airport—not in a dark sky area, but there are some fairly dark areas between there and Glasgow. Prestwick airport is in partnership with Houston—for those who
know Scotland, that is not Houston, Renfrewshire, but Houston, Texas—and it is set to become a space port. There are companies ready to take full advantage, but they need these young people to be inspired and to study physics, engineering and astronomy. The young people also need to have some sort of catalyst to make them do that. Dark sky areas can only help.

I thank the hon. Member for South East Cornwall once again for bringing this debate to the House and congratulate Bodmin moor on its dark sky status, which is not as easy to say as it seems. I wish Cornwall all the very best of success in inspiring the young people of that area and hopefully areas further afield. All the best of success in the future, and perhaps the next time I visit Cornwall it will not be so cloudy.

**Mr Virendra Sharma (in the Chair):** I call Dr Drew.

**Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op):** It is a delight to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma—

**Bill Grant rose—**

**Mr Virendra Sharma (in the Chair):** Order. Normal practice is that Members indicate that they wish to speak, which you did not do, Mr Grant, and that is why I called the Opposition spokesperson. However, there is time for you to make a brief contribution.

4.58 pm

**Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con):** I apologise, Mr Sharma; I am relatively new and still learning. I will be brief. Thank you for your understanding.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) for initiating this debate. There was a mention of somewhere being “darker still” Not only do we have whisky stills in Scotland, but we are darker still, too, so we have some things in common. Cornwall had tin mines and Cornish pasties; Scotland had coal mines and Scotch pies. I am going to talk about Dalmellington in the Doon valley, near Galloway forest dark sky park, which the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), too, for her contribution on behalf of the SNP.

I do not intend to delay Members long, but I will make some remarks that I hope will be helpful. This debate has been a learning experience for me. I usually get people moaning when their lights go off and asking me to ensure that they are put back on, but it is valuable for people to have the opportunity to look at the dark sky. I thought that we might turn off the lights in the Chamber and have the debate in the dark, but that might have challenged a few of us who are not capable of eating enough carrots to read our notes in the dark.

This is a serious debate and, as I say, I have taken it as a learning experience. I did not realise that 65 places in the United Kingdom are classified as dark skies places. That is interesting, because it is difficult to become so classified. I am pleased that, if I were going to be in Cornwall on Saturday, I would be able to go to Jamaica Inn, which I have visited previously. For the princely sum of £15, I could get a meal and look at the skies both before and after it. As a vegetarian, I have to say that I hope it puts on vegetarian options as well as what seemed to be a carvery, otherwise it will not be able to attract me there again. It is important that we celebrate the night sky and teach our children about astronomy and the wonder of the sky, which some of us take far too readily for granted.

This is clearly a consensual debate—we would all like to share in such experiences—but I have some questions for the Minister, just to keep her on her toes. First, do we intend to increase the number of applications to be a dark sky place? As I said, getting accepted is quite a laborious process—the application form is some 100 pages long—so perhaps we can help places that would otherwise fall by the wayside to do that.

Secondly, I am told that Plymouth is in the process of installing LED street lights, which the hon. Member for Glasgow North West mentioned. Not only is that great for the environment, but it will save the city about £1 million—now there is a reason why it should be done. What is the Government’s programme in that respect? I know that is a local authority responsibility,
but if they are serious about this, the Government could take a lead and encourage local authorities that are thinking of installing LED lights—it is all about them pointing down rather than out and up—to do so. That would be a good progressive policy for any Government. How is the Minister helping?

Thirdly, how are we working with different organisations? I declare an interest as a long-standing member of the CPRE. It is good that it has issued awards for dark sky initiatives. It would be interesting to know how the Government links into those awards and works with such organisations.

Fourthly, it is relevant for us to look at the idea of dark sky parks and it is interesting that Cornwall is leading the way in that regard, but I am not sure that I fully understand them, so perhaps the Government will provide some education. Those parks are crucial in encouraging people to come into the countryside not just for day visits—for walks, cycle rides and so on—but to experience a different lifestyle in the evening. It would help to have clarity about what a dark sky park is.

Last but not least, will the Minister say something about how we deal with artificial light? As I say, I always get people coming to me who are worried about the lights being turned off at night. They feel somewhat threatened because of crime and because they have got used to having street lights. It would be interesting, because I had not really understood this, to hear about whether we can declare light a statutory nuisance where it is oppressive and affects people’s ability to get to sleep at night. Most councils now turn lights off at night to stop energy being wasted. Can we do that earlier and save more money? Can light be declared a statutory nuisance? From reading the Library briefing, it seems that doing so is quite a complicated process.

I again congratulate the hon. Member for South East Cornwall. This is an interesting topic that catches the imagination of people of all ages, and we may all be able to do a bit more about it in our areas. I represent Stroud, which includes part of the Cotswolds, and I will certainly consider whether we ought to look at dark sky status to encourage people to look at the night sky. I look forward to hearing how the Minister answers all those questions.

5.8 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): It is a huge pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) on securing this important debate, which has been well attended by people who want to put forward the benefits of the dark sky.

I am sure we all agree that a truly clear, star-filled night sky is one of the greatest spectacles of nature. In an area of low light pollution, it is possible to see as many as 2,000 stars on a clear night, but in our brightly lit modern world many people seldom get the opportunity to experience that. Only last week, a new study was published showing that between 2012 and 2016, the planet’s artificially lit outdoor area grew by more than 2% per year.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) talked about her children and her experiences growing up. I have to admit, growing up in Liverpool, pink skies were a huge feature of the urban glow as the light was partially reflected. Dark nights seemed to be a rarity, and we used to find out about the stars by going to the planetarium. Therefore, when I moved to a village with no street lights at all I now live in a market town where the council turns off street lights at midnight—it was a joy to behold. Ken and Muriel Bennett, the constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall, are right to point out that just looking upwards can spark such an interest in science; indeed, it can inspire a generation. I understand why my hon. Friend wants to support them.

I welcome the initiative undertaken in Cornwall in seeking the designation of Bodmin moor as an international dark sky site. I am delighted that Cornwall is leading by example in this regard, and I recognise the efforts of my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) in trying to secure further designations in the county. As to this particular reserve, I warmly welcome the work that Cornwall Council, Caradon observatory and the Cornwall Nature Partnership have carried out in partnership with Natural England to develop their environmental growth strategy. This is a positive example of long-term thinking, setting out a vision of a sustainable future for the county right through to 2065.

Following the launch last year, I understand that a wide range of businesses, individuals and organisations have pledged specific contributions towards achieving environmental-based growth in Cornwall. As my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall described, that will reconnect people with the wonder of dark skies, as well as offering a range of benefits to local communities.

The Government have been active for some time in promoting dark skies within national parks and areas of outstanding natural beauty. For example, we supported the successful application for dark sky status by Exmoor national park, which, in 2011, became the first international dark sky reserve to be designated in Europe. The Government also supported the South Downs national park, which was designated last year. Indeed, Natural England gave its support to Cornwall Council’s successful application to designate Bodmin moor as an international dark sky landscape, the benefits of which we have heard so much about.

I draw hon. Members’ attention to an example from the other end of the country, where the Northumberland international dark sky park has become the largest in Europe. That has had a hugely positive impact on the local economy, with about 20,000 visitors making the journey to Kielder observatory each year. That in turn has helped the park to become a year-round destination, enabling businesses to remain open and viable throughout the winter months. It has also helped to enhance local residents’ quality of life and to inspire and educate people about astronomy and the natural world. That clearly demonstrates the range of benefits—social, environmental and economic—that can flow from such an initiative. I am also aware that, just last month, Exmoor had a week of celebration that boosted its season and is in line with the Government’s strategy on productivity in parks and AONBs.

In answer to the hon. Member for Glasgow North West, VAT is a matter for the Treasury. She will recognise that in terms of tourism, but I know that those representations are made regularly. My hon. Friend the
Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) praised the Scottish dark sky observatory. He is right to do so; it is something of which he should be proud.

Light pollution is an issue that can challenge rural areas and blight urban areas. While I fully accept that artificial light brings valuable benefits to society in safety and in facilitating a thriving night time economy—we think of the spectacular Blackpool illuminations—if used incorrectly or carelessly it can contribute to a range of problems. It can be a source of annoyance to people, be harmful to wildlife and waste energy, as well as prevent enjoyment of the night sky.

That is why we have taken action to ensure that light pollution is addressed through the planning system. The national planning policy framework makes it clear that planning policies and decisions should limit the impact of light pollution on local amenity, dark landscapes and nature conservation. It is supported by guidance that emphasises the importance of getting the right light in the right place at the right time and helps local planners and developers to design in ways of avoiding glare and intrusion.

As the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) said, artificial light can be classified as a potential statutory nuisance. That means that local authorities have a duty to investigate complaints about light emitted from premises that could constitute a nuisance or be harmful to health, and they have powers to take action when there is a problem. I have an anecdote: I admit that this did not affect me directly, but at a golf club in one of my constituencies, what the lighting was doing was so poor that I genuinely thought the place was on fire. This is a challenge in which working with businesses matters, and I want to encourage councils to do that. There are grants available to help people get LED lighting, and the Energy Saving Trust is probably the best gateway for that.

I have to alert the House that the jury is still slightly out on the benefits of LED versus sodium, specifically in regard to light pollution. Undoubtedly, LED lights are better in terms of saving energy, but they must be directed downwards in a particular way. Otherwise, there is an issue about the photobiological effects of LED lighting with high blue light components: there is an increase in light pollution, the greater the blue light content of the light source. That has been investigated, and that is why the Government have worked with Highways England and, I think, the CPRE, the Commission for Dark Skies and others to produce guidance on how best to place this in the future.

As we all know, street lighting is an important issue and needs to be managed carefully to strike the right balance between preserving road safety and avoiding light pollution. The Department for Transport is therefore encouraging local authorities to replace their street lighting with modern lighting that reduces the amount of glare emitted. Highways England, which manages our motorways and major roads, is also working actively to minimise light pollution. As I say, it is working with the Commission for Dark Skies and the CPRE to develop improved road lighting standards. It is also investing in technology that allows lighting to be dimmed or switched off in response to lower traffic flows.

Finally, it is important to remember, as has been pointed out, that light pollution can affect wildlife as well as people, and that nocturnal or migratory species in particular can be disturbed by it. We have legislative controls in place to prevent the disturbance of protected species, and Natural England is always available to provide advice in such cases, including by helping to think through the possible unintended consequences of artificial lighting for habitats and wildlife.

It is not only central and local government that are taking action in this area. Last year, for example, the Campaign to Protect Rural England launched interactive maps that allow users anywhere in the country to look at the artificial lighting situation in their postcode compared with other parts of the country. That is a useful tool that can inform local decision making on where action may be needed to control light pollution.

It is important that dark skies and the management of artificial light are part of our future thinking on the environment, given how important we know they are for wellbeing, quality of life and so much else besides. We need to ensure that policy in this area evolves to take account of the challenges and opportunities of the next 25 years, and that we balance the needs of a growing, vibrant society with the ability to access tranquil spaces and clear night skies, now and in future generations.

I will try to answer some of the questions. On funding, I have already tried to guide my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall towards the Energy Saving Trust. I think in particular of the funding she requested for Ken and Muriel Bennett. Off the top of my head, I do not have a particular sense of where that would be at the moment, but I wonder if the Royal Astronomical Society would be a useful avenue to explore. I also think, if they are trying to widen the educational opportunity, lottery funding from the big society may be something to consider.

On some of the other questions that the hon. Member for Stroud raised, the Government are not setting out a plan deliberately to try to grow the number of applications. There are now sufficient parks for us to share how people can best do this, but I must emphasise that the Government do not have a formal role in the designation process. It is non-governmental and non-statutory; in fact, it is undertaken by the International Dark-Sky Association. It looks at five sorts of different designations that people can apply for and be considered for. The applications are reviewed by a standing committee composed of dark sky experts and previous successful programme applicants. Given the growing number of these areas, not only in England but in Wales and Scotland, there is sufficient expertise out there that interested councils could go to. I must admit that I am considering encouraging my council in Suffolk Coastal to consider this.

I conclude by once again thanking my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall for giving us the opportunity to discuss this important issue. She really has highlighted how wonderful this has been for her constituency, and I look forward to hearing more about how the designation of Bodmin Moor as an international dark sky landscape helps to benefit her local community, both directly and through tourism and research over the years ahead. I am happy to explore how my Department might want to assist future applications, but I am conscious
that, as I say, there is expertise out there already. As always, I encourage people to look to those who have already had success.

5.19 pm

Mrs Murray: I thank hon. Members for attending the debate, which has clearly demonstrated that there is complete cross-party consensus. We have had contributions from the official Opposition, the Scottish nationalists, the Democratic Unionist party and the Conservative party. I think we are all speaking with one voice on this issue. Let us hope that we can take this forward in every way possible.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Cornwall’s dark skies status.

5.20 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Thursday 30 November 2017

[Steve McCabe in the Chair]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS
Deafness and Hearing Loss

1.30 pm

Steve McCabe (in the Chair): I draw hon. Members’ attention to the fact that our proceedings are being made accessible for people who are deaf or have problems with hearing, and the interpreters are using British Sign Language. If Members bear that in mind while making their contributions, that will be helpful for everyone.

1.31 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered deafness and hearing loss.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr McCabe. I am even more pleased to see that our debate is being interpreted into sign language, which I believe is a parliamentary first; we may be making history, which is great for all of us who are here to participate. I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for the opportunity to introduce the debate, and I am very pleased that so many colleagues have been able to join us to contribute to this important discussion. It is good to see the Minister in his place, even though the subject is not exactly in his brief, and I look forward to hearing the winding-up speeches from him and from the Opposition spokespeople.

I place on the record my thanks to the UK Council on Deafness, Action on Hearing Loss, the National Deaf Children’s Society, Deaf Plus, the Adult Cochlear Implant Action Group and Brian Lamb, DeaflympicsGB, Access Bedford, the network Three and the House of Commons Library for their assistance in preparing for the debate. That is a long list, but given that 11 million people across the UK are living with hearing loss, it could have been much longer. The UK Council on Deafness, for example, represents 43 deafness or hearing loss organisations and has produced a collective briefing. I should also declare that I wear two hearing aids of my own and am chair of the all-party group on deafness.

There are too many issues for me to raise personally and it would be unfair not to share the time available as equitably as possible among hon. Members. Members present, so the bulk of my speech, which I have timed at 13 and a half minutes, will focus on three key issues: Access to Work, legal recognition of British Sign Language and the implementation of the national action plan on hearing loss. First, however, I would like to put down a brief marker on several other issues that I do not have time to raise in detail.

I secured an Adjournment debate on cochlear implants in March, in which the then Minister David Mowat advised me that the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence would consult on new proposals by the end of the summer. We are still awaiting that consultation, so any information from the Minister would be very welcome.

Requests to improve paediatric audiology services across the country by accrediting them through the IQIPS—improving quality in physiological services—programme have been made for some time. I would welcome an update on any progress on voluntary accreditation or, if that has proved unsatisfactory, on whether the Government have given more thought to making it compulsory.

On Deaflympics, any information from the Minister about discussions between his Department and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport on support for our deaf athletes would be very welcome.

On early years intervention, the first three and a half years are critical for the development of listening and spoken language. I would be grateful for any update from the Minister on Government thinking about ensuring that auditory-verbal is put on the patient pathway as a follow-up to the newborn hearing screening.

Finally, I have some positive news about telecommunication services: the briefing from Three shared how it provides services for its deaf or hard-of-hearing customers. I also have some good news from Deaf Plus, whose BSL advice line was shortlisted this week for a national Helplines Partnership award. Well done!

Let me return to my three key issues, beginning with Access to Work. One person in six in the UK—or approximately 11 million people—is living with some form of hearing loss, and estimates show that nearly 90,000 use British Sign Language as their first language. The Government’s Access to Work scheme provides grants to disabled people to enable them to have equal participation in the workforce. It has revolutionised the career opportunities of deaf people, shattering the glass ceiling that had limited them to manual jobs. It has been largely due to Access to Work that deaf people have progressed as far as their talent allows: there are now deaf chief executive officers, deaf Ministry of Justice intermediaries and deaf theatre directors, among other senior professionals.

In March 2015, however, the then Minister for Disabled People, the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), announced that the Government would impose a cap. The cap means that the scheme no longer properly supports those deaf and disabled people for whom support costs are more expensive. For deaf people who are self-employed or entrepreneurs, there is no employer to make up the difference between the award and the need. In a recent written answer, the Department for Work and Pensions indicated that it was unable to state the number of people still in receipt of awards above the cap.

The UK Council on Deafness conducted its own survey to establish the impact of the cap on deaf people. It received 87 responses, including 60 from those who will be capped in April 2018—a high response rate, given that fewer than 200 people were identified in the equality assessment as potentially in that situation. Deaf people tell us that they are already avoiding applying for work in professional, managerial and senior roles that will be capped. The cap on Access to Work awards risks imposing a glass ceiling for deaf and disabled people in their work. Some 46% said that they would not apply for promotions, 20% said they had not applied...
because they were worried, and 44% said that they would stay with their current employer for as long as possible because they were worried about a new employer.

Will the Government look again at the evidence opposing the cap on Access to Work awards? Do the Government accept that the cap on Access to Work grants is set too low? The Secretary of State amended it from £42,100 to £43,000 in his statement today, but that is still too low. If the Government will not remove the cap, will they consider raising it to a level that provides deaf people with more of the support they need? Finally, have the Government considered that they may inadvertently have created legitimate financial grounds on which employers can discriminate against job applicants who use BSL? I recognise that those are questions mainly for the DWP, but if the Minister cannot respond to them today, I would be grateful if he ensured they were passed on to the appropriate quarter. In answer to my question in the Chamber about an hour ago, the Secretary of State said that the Government were still looking at evidence. I hope that means that the door is still open, because increasing the threshold by £1,000 clearly does not cut it.

In general employment terms, there are hurdles to getting into work for people with hearing loss anyway. In a YouGov survey commissioned by Action on Hearing Loss, 35% of business leaders stated that they did not feel confident about their business employing a person with hearing loss, while 57% agreed that there is a lack of available support or advice for employers about employing people with hearing loss. Access to Work is still the DWP’s best-kept secret: 63% of the business leaders polled had never heard of it.

Let me move on to British Sign Language. BSL is the first or preferred language of more than 80,000 deaf people in the UK, and more than 150,000 people use it at home. In 1987, the British Deaf Association launched a call for the legal recognition of BSL, and in 2003, following extensive lobbying, BSL was officially recognised as a language in its own right by the DWP.

In 2009, the UK Government ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which states that Governments must uphold rights by “Accepting and facilitating the use of sign languages...in official interactions” and by “Recognizing and promoting the use of sign languages.” Despite formal recognition by the UK Government that BSL is a language in its own right, there has been no further progress towards establishing a legal status for BSL.

In the devolved Administrations, the situation is different. In 2012, a consultation for a British Sign Language Act in Scotland was initiated, culminating in the passing of the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015. In 2017, the Scottish Government published their first BSL national plan. In 2016, a sign language framework consultation was launched in Northern Ireland. Despite those developments, however, there is still no pathway in place for legal recognition of BSL across the UK. With such legal recognition of BSL would come the rights of deaf people, and the benefits for deaf people and for wider society would be far-reaching.

On education, deaf children are 42% less likely to achieve five or more GCSEs at grade C or above than their hearing peers, but there is no reason a deaf child should do any worse than a hearing child. On health, 70% of deaf people who have not been to a GP recently wanted to go but did not, mainly because there was no interpreter available. Deaf people who have been told that they might have high blood pressure are three times more likely than everyone else not to have it under control. Deaf people are almost twice as likely as others to experience mental health issues, which can be exacerbated by social exclusion. A health economics study showed that eliminating poor diagnosis could save the NHS £30 million annually—and it is worth noting that 90% of deaf children are born into hearing families.

The call to Government is that the deaf community want them to acknowledge the benefits of legal recognition of BSL and commit to establishing a UK-wide sign language framework consultation for a UK-wide sign language Act. The British Deaf Association is asking for this consultation process to be led by an appropriate Department whose remit covers language. However, that is another major obstacle and it prompts a question for the Minister: which Department and which Minister lead on BSL? I have been writing for some time to try to find out. I even tabled a parliamentary question to the Cabinet Office and the answer that question elicited was that “all Government departments have a responsibility to create inclusive communications. This does not mean promoting BSL as an activity in itself but it does mean identifying and meeting the communication needs of the audiences we are targeting.”

I am sorry, Minister, but that answer is nowhere near clear enough and I think it demonstrates why BSL is stranded. No Department is responsible for it; no Minister is responsible for it; there is no champion in Government who is responsible for it; there is no advocacy for it; and there is no progress on it.

Finally on BSL, there is the case for a British Sign Language GCSE. Although BSL is a recognised language within the UK, a GCSE that can be taught in schools is not available. A GCSE on BSL has already been piloted and is largely ready to go, but the Department for Education is declining to give it the go-ahead. There is a principle of fairness and justice here. BSL is an official language in the UK that is used by tens of thousands of people. Not allowing BSL to be taught as a GCSE implies that it has a lower status and importance than other subjects, and that could even be seen as discriminatory against deaf people. Also, we do not have enough deaf interpreters. Judging by the briefings that we have all received, I think that there are 800 to 900 registered deaf interpreters, which is clearly inadequate to deal with more than 100,000 people.

The last of the three issues that I will raise today is the implementation of the action plan on hearing loss. When the Department of Health and NHS England published that plan in March 2015, it was widely welcomed. This cross-Government plan not only recognised hearing loss as a major public health issue, but highlighted the major impacts of hearing loss. It also committed the Government to improving services for everyone living with hearing loss. In addition, it set out the need to reduce variation in the provision of services, through the development of guidelines by NICE on adult-onset hearing loss.
The action plan set out five key objectives in the following areas: earlier diagnosis; good prevention; integrated services; increased independence and ageing; and good learning outcomes. There was wide support for the plan. As part of the implementation, NHS England published its new national commissioning framework for hearing loss services in July 2016. It is essential that information about that framework is properly disseminated by NHS England and that the framework is fully adopted by clinical commissioning groups. To help with that dissemination, in September, NHS England published its “What Works Guides—Action Plan on Hearing Loss”, which provides advice to commissioners and providers on supporting people with hearing loss in a variety of different settings.

NHS England is also set to publish guidance imminently, setting out the need for health and wellbeing boards to consider people with hearing loss when they are commissioning services, as well as considering its data tool. In this case, the requests made of Government would be fairly straightforward to meet, because the frameworks are in place.

The UK Council on Deafness is asking the Government to work with NHS England, commissioners and professional bodies for medical professionals to raise the importance of early diagnosis of hearing loss; produce an analysis of the case for hearing screening, potentially adding it to the NHS health check that is provided to people in England aged between 40 and 70; and raise the importance of promoting the commissioning framework through NHS England. The framework provides a clear alternative to the decommissioning of hearing aids, and CCGs should be aware of it when designing and commissioning local services.

It is fair to say that on the three major issues I have raised today the Government have a mixed report card. On Access to Work, the Government started very positively, then faltered and now could be going backwards. We need the response of the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to my question in the main Chamber today on the need to continue to look at the evidence to make serious progress, because the evidence, as I hope I have laid out, is very much there.

On BSL, the Government never really got started. That is not just the Minister’s Government; that is “the British Government”, a phrase that covers both sides of the Chamber. We are still stalled on BSL and there is no sign of an ignition switch to start us moving again. We need a champion of BSL in Government.

On the action plan, the Government started well and maintained progress, but they need to move through the gears now to ensure that that progress continues and secures the promised outcomes. We only need more of the same, because the start in this area was welcomed by the whole deaf and hearing loss community.

Finally, this is an important debate and I am grateful that so many colleagues have managed to be here to participate. I am also grateful for the opportunity to open the debate and I look forward to the contributions that will follow.

I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) on securing this debate and on setting out his case with his customary courtesy and passion. He has been a champion of these issues for many years, so I pay him heartfelt tribute for that.

As the hon. Gentleman said, this is the first debate in the House to be transmitted via British Sign Language. Unfortunately, news of that came too late for one of my constituents, Christopher Jones, who wanted to attend, but decided not to travel down from Milton Keynes because he did not think that this facility would be available. Mr McCabe, perhaps you could report back to the Speaker and the Panel of Chairs that we should consider providing this interpretation not only during debates on this subject, but during general debates more widely, so that we are as accessible as possible to all our constituents.

I will focus on the introduction of a nationwide telephone relay service—something that Mr Jones came to see me about a few weeks ago. In most advanced economies, a nationwide TRS provides functionally equivalent telephone transmission services to deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals. A TRS is a telephone transmission service that allows an individual who is deaf or hard of hearing to have the same telephone functionality as someone who is of good hearing. As telephone services and technologies evolve, so does the scope and achievement of functional equivalence. At one time, typed text communication was considered the functional equivalent of voice communication, but in the 21st century, captioning, video and other technologies have changed what equivalency means. The gaps between what is available to hearing individuals and those with hearing deficiency are growing. Sadly, the UK, which was the first to introduce such systems, now lags well behind other countries such as the USA, Australia, Canada and New Zealand.

The issue of functionally equivalent telephone services must be addressed. It includes, but is not limited to: the unrestricted availability of relay services 24 hours a day, seven days a week; emergency preparedness and response, to ensure the delivery of relay services in the event of disruptions to telecommunications services; international capacity; and access to the full array of existing telephone services offered by telecommunications companies. Competition, innovation and choice are important, so that users can access a wide range of services. What works for some people in some circumstances might be different from what others need. There are different facilities available, and it is important that each user can choose the system that works best for them at any one time. That might mean one individual having different things at different times. My constituent said that he would use one means to communicate with his family, and a different one for business conversations. Many other issues need to be considered.

While these may seem like lofty goals, they are being delivered in the countries I mentioned. For example, Australia provides the following relay services: textphone to voice and voice to textphone; textphone voice carry-over; textphone hearing carry-over; speech to speech; video relay services; internet relay; mobile text relay; mobile SMS relay; captioned telephone for phone and web; and captioned telephone to Braille display. In Australia, the system has operated as a national service since 1995 and is available to every Australian at no additional cost, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.
[Iain Stewart]

A number of studies since the system’s introduction have looked at its impact. We might think some of the findings are obvious, but it is important to mention them. Access to enhanced relay services is positively associated with reductions in feelings of frustration with telephone use. It gives individuals a much higher quality of life. It not only allows access to work, as the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse mentioned, but is proven to reduce the wider health consequences that can arise from isolation, such as mental health issues. The cost saving is likely to exceed the cost of introducing the service. I think I heard him mention that £30 million annually could be saved from the health and social care budget if many of these feelings of social exclusion were dealt with.

Ironically, my constituent was involved in designing and setting up such a system many years ago. It had to close down in 2008 as he could not make it work, and part of the problem was bureaucratic muddle and delay. The issue is often cross-departmental. We have a Minister from the Department of Health here, but the matter is as much for the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and the Department for Work and Pensions. The potential benefits of the system my constituent introduced could not be realised because there was buck-passing and delays, and the approach was not joined up.

My call today is for the Minister to take away these points and discuss them with his colleagues in DWP and DCMS, and to drive forward the introduction of a nationwide service in this country. It is embarrassing that while we were one of the first to introduce such systems, we have fallen back over a number of decades. Other countries are now way ahead of us. I urge the Minister and his colleagues to look at the evidence, particularly from Australia, on what can be done cost-effectively. This is not just about money; it is about quality of life. We owe it to all our constituents to give them as much access to the world of work and public services as anyone else, and my suggestion is a fairly straightforward way to do that. I urge the Minister to look at the evidence from other countries and discuss it with his colleagues.

1.56 pm

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): I begin by echoing the tribute paid to my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) for securing this debate. As we have heard, there are a number of dimensions and aspects to deafness, but I want to focus on one issue: the criteria for receiving cochlear implants under the NHS. My argument today is simple: the criteria should be reviewed so that it is easier to get an implant. That would transform the lives of those who need this technology, and improve the lives of their families and loved ones. It would be a prudent investment, because it would obviate the need for more expenditure further down the line as a consequence of people not receiving the implants they desperately need.

I will tell the story of my constituent, Lamina Lloyd. Until last year, Lamina had a flourishing career as the manager of a local citizens advice bureau. However, Lamina has Meniere’s disease, which has resulted in progressive hearing loss—so much so that last year she had to give up work. She has two children who themselves have additional needs. She can no longer hear her children, who have to act as her ears. She describes herself as having gone from an outdoor family to one that rarely leaves the house. Lamina is an intelligent, capable person, but hearing loss has meant the end of her career, a diminishment in the quality of her family life, and increasing isolation.

To try to alleviate her condition, Lamina wears the most powerful hearing aids available, turned up to maximum volume, but they make little difference and give her frequent ear infections and headaches from their feedback and squealing noises. She can no longer hear music or follow conversations, yet she has been in a battle—that is the only word for it—for the past two years to try to get a cochlear implant. She falls just 5 dB short, which is no more than a whisper, of the 90 dB hearing loss threshold for consideration for an implant. That threshold is one of the strictest in the western world. It is estimated that only 5% of those who could benefit from the technology get access to it in the UK.

Lamina describes her condition as being too deaf to hear, yet not deaf enough to get the help that could make a huge difference to her life. Her hearing has deteriorated even further in recent months, and she has an appointment to be assessed at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham in two weeks’ time, but she and many others in her position have serious reservations about how the assessments are made. The Baha/ Haut-Kowal-Bench test uses short sentences, which does not replicate normal conversation or real-world conditions. Lamina and many others feel that that tool is not fit for the purpose of properly measuring hearing ability and hearing loss.

Even if Lamina is approved for an implant, why has it taken so long? Why do we put people and their families through such pain before giving them the help that could be life changing? My hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse raised those issues in an Adjournment debate earlier this year, and briefly at the beginning of his speech today. He was told earlier this year that the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence was launching a consultation on the relevant guidelines. That has not happened. The guidelines have been in place since 2009, but technology and costs have moved on a great deal since then.

I wish to ask the Minister a few questions. If he cannot respond to them all today, I would be very happy for him to consult with colleagues and write to me, and other Members participating in the debate, with a more considered response. First, why has the NICE consultation, which we were promised would be launched this summer, not yet been launched, and when will it be? Secondly, does he agree that Lamina’s case and many similar cases around the country show that there is an overwhelming argument for revising those criteria?

Thirdly, whatever hearing loss threshold is picked, does the Minister agree that the hearing loss test needs to be done in real-world conditions that approximate to how people actually live their lives and conduct conversations, and so on? Fourthly, and perhaps more fundamentally, why does it take so long for people to get an implant? Why is it such a battle? The NHS is there for those who need it; it should not be an organisation that people have to battle with to get the treatment that
they need. Had my constituent been helped earlier, she might still be in a job. She would not need to rely on the state for financial support, and her family would not have had to go through the huge difficulties that they have all been through together over the last couple of years.

It is time for a step change in the urgency with which the issue of cochlear implants is treated. The guidelines must be revised. NICE needs to move on that soon, so that the suffering of my constituent Lamina Lloyd, and the many people around the country who are in a similar position, can be alleviated.

Jim Fitzpatrick: On a point of order, Mr McCabe. I asked my staff to monitor the transmission of the sign language. It is not being broadcast; the cameras do not meet the interpreters. Westminster Hall debates do not have subtitles, unlike in the main Chamber. Obviously I would very much appreciate it if you took that matter back to the Panel of Chairs and discussed it in due course.

Steve McCabe (in the Chair): I understand that the sign language is being filmed today, and when the debate is re-broadcast it will appear in a box, as is normal in other TV transmissions. Obviously this is an early stage. I will report back on how the whole debate goes and any points that Members raise, but I understand that the arrangements for today are that when the debate is re-broadcast, the sign language will appear.

Jim Fitzpatrick: I am grateful for that clarification, Mr McCabe.

2.3 pm

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I congratulate the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) on securing this important debate; it is an absolutely fantastic move that today’s debate is being signed. I advocate that more debates held in the Chamber be signed. It should be the norm in the House of Commons, not an exception to the rule.

I was very keen to speak in this debate about deafness and hearing loss, because it has had a major effect on my family. Rather than focusing on the many issues that affect deaf people in this country, I want to share with hon. Members an example of how deafness has affected my life.

Twenty-five years ago, at the age of 40, my mum lost her hearing literally overnight, due to a virus. She woke up one morning and could not hear any more. She had not been ill and had never had any hearing problems, but she went from being a hearing person one day to having no hearing the next day. At that time, we had a really good ear, nose and throat hospital in Maidstone. About a week after my mum lost her hearing, my father took her there, and it was confirmed that she had no hearing. The hospital staff put her on steroids and told her that it was due to a virus, that the hairs in her ears had died and that it was very unlikely she would ever get her hearing back.

That was absolutely devastating for my mother and for us all—my sister, myself and my dad. It changed her—and our—life fundamentally. We could not communicate with her; everything had to be written down. My mum could not sign or lip-read, so she was flung into isolation and, quite honestly, a state of depression. It was a really tough time. She had two teenage girls who were at that time very much into their singing, and all of a sudden, my mum had to accept that she would never again be able to hear her daughters sing.

Due to the abruptness of her hearing loss, it was really difficult to mitigate some of the emotional damage she suffered. The NHS looked after her and the staff tried to help her. They gave her lip-reading classes and offered her support with a counsellor; they even put her in contact with another lady in the country who had lost her hearing overnight, but my mum was still mourning the loss of something that she was never going to get back. Importantly, she was never told that she was a candidate to have a cochlear implant—that reinforces the point made by the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden).

Deafness is the invisible disability. My mum did not look like she had a disability. Her voice sounded like it always had, because she had been a hearing person for 40 years, but I saw and experienced at first hand the major barriers that people who are deaf have to face. I recognise that there are strong differences between individuals who have been born deaf, those who have gradual hearing loss, and those who had hearing loss as a small child, perhaps due to meningitis or some other illness, but the biggest thing for my mum was that she did not have any deaf friends. We did not even know any deaf people.

Particularly acute was the fact that my mum’s opportunities were severely limited. She had looked after me and my sister at home, but was looking forward to going back to work because we were now in our teens. All of a sudden, she found that she was unable to work, because she did not have the confidence, and it was very difficult for her to understand anyone at that time. The opportunities open to her were therefore extremely limited.

Eventually, after eight years, my mum decided that she wanted to do something about her hearing loss. She went to the doctors, and they talked to her about whether she could be a candidate for a cochlear implant. She was told that she would have been able to access one immediately, because of the severity of her hearing loss, but it then took another two years for her to have an implant, because 25 years ago the funding was quite a challenge, due to the fact that such procedures were not as frequent as they are now.

After 10 years of suffering, being isolated, suffering with depression and being unable to go back to work, she finally had the cochlear implant. Sadly for her, after a year of travelling to St Thomas’ hospital, with its fabulous technicians, led by Terry Nunn, it was decided that the cochlear implant had not worked. She therefore had to go back for a further implant. Many people will not understand that a cochlear implant does not bring someone’s hearing back. They do not hear like they did when they were a hearing person, but it gives them some quality of life.

Technology has changed, and 25 years on, cochlear implants are available not just in London, but all over the country. What is very clear is that the sooner someone has a cochlear implant after the loss of hearing, the greater impact it will have on how that person hears. I was extremely worried on reading the reports, which have...
already been mentioned, that some clinical commissioning groups are now looking at stopping hearing aid provision. One of the only things that kept my mother going through those 10 years was that she was using a hearing aid. It did not help her hearing—all it did was accentuate the background noises and cut some of her tinnitus some of the time—but if she had not had access to that service in the time before having a cochlear implant, it would have been even worse. In my view, hearing aids are a cheap way of having an impact on people who are suffering from gradual hearing loss. I find it quite frightening that CCGs would even be considering stopping that support, and I think it is a dangerous road to go down.

As hon. Members have already said, hearing loss, even if it is mild, sends people into isolation. They might not put themselves into certain situations because of fear of not understanding or not being able to hear what is going on. I used to go into the supermarket with my mother and people would ask her if she would like a carrier bag, but because she did not hear them, they would think she was rude. They might make a rude comment to her because of that, but she actually could not hear them. Hearing aids are massively important and can be an important way of keeping people out of that isolation and of maintaining their contact with the health service so that the hearing loss can be monitored.

It is not often talked about, but people who suffer from hearing loss and deafness are also very embarrassed by their disability. If it was physically visible, everybody would be talking about that kind of disability. People would be banging the drum and asking for support from the Government and different organisations; but deaf people work, get on with their lives and rarely moan very much. They put up with quite a lot. Because they do not have a visible characteristic, it is very difficult for hearing people to truly understand the isolation, depression and mental health issues that they are subjected to.

I have spoken today very much from an emotional point of view about a real-life situation that has affected me. I hope that what I have said has illustrated that deafness can take many different forms; it occurs not just in old age, or from birth. For too long, deaf people have been disadvantaged and isolated. It is really good to have this debate, and I join the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) in supporting the cause of the deaf. It did not help her hearing—all it did was accentuate the background noises and cut some of her tinnitus some of the time—but if she had not had access to that service in the time before having a cochlear implant, it would have been even worse. I hope that what I have said has illustrated that deafness can take many different forms; it occurs not just in old age, or from birth. For too long, deaf people have been disadvantaged and isolated. It is really good to have this debate, and I join the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) in supporting the cause of the deaf.

I commend the previous speakers’ comments about cochlear implants. I remember 20 or 30 years ago, when they really began to take off. The difference between now and then is absolutely huge. That overlaps with what the hon. Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst) described of her mother’s experience. I thank her for that moving speech. Her mum will be proud of her, I am absolutely sure of that. I can relate to a lot of the things that her mum went through. I have been deaf for about 50 years of my life.

Cochlear implants have made a huge difference and the improvement is absolutely massive. The Minister is from the Department of Health—he is an old colleague from coalition days; it is good to see him—and I ask him to explore how cochlear implants can be ever more available, because they do much more now and they do it much earlier. They are a game-changer. For many years after they first came out, a long, long time ago, they really did not make that much of a difference. There was vigorous opposition from a lot of the British Sign Language community, and I understand why. That has changed a great deal over the years and cochlear implants are now, in many ways, the future for transforming deafness. I never really believed it in the old days, but now I do, because of the advances.

I would like to cover a few areas, a couple from the UK Council on Deafness angle and a couple specifically because we have a Health Minister here. British Sign Language is a different language. I am hard of hearing and have been since having measles when I was six. Sometimes, people might say to me, “Stephen, are you a member of the deaf community?” and I would say, “No, I am a member of the hearing community. I just don’t hear very well.” That is an important point, because they are completely different. The deaf community is a community. The BSL community is a completely different community, with cultural norms and a different language. BSL is not even a direct translation of my speech; it is different. Sometimes people do not understand that. They would say to me, “Why don’t you learn BSL?” and I would say, “Because I am a member of the hearing community, I just don’t hear very well, and it is a different language.” I am very supportive of profoundly deaf people trying to get BSL as a recognised language, as has happened, I believe, in Holyrood in Scotland.

I remember just before 2015 having meetings with a number of people down from Scotland and we were watching that development with great interest. Once it happens in one legislative House, it is very hard for other legislative Houses not to follow, so I say good luck with that up in Scotland, because it is a game-changer. It will happen eventually in Westminster. When it does, it is not just a label. When a nation says that a language is a statutory language, it means it is accessible and that public bodies have to provide information in that language, and that will make a huge difference for a lot of profoundly deaf people. I will tell hon. Members why and give one very good example.

I have been involved for many years in politics around deafness as a trustee of this or a patron of that, or what have you. I knew a lot of people who are profoundly deaf working in that area, including from the British Deaf Association. I just came from a statement this morning in which the Secretary of State for the Department for Work and Pensions mentioned that about 50% of disabled people are out of work. I tell you
what, Mr McCabe, it is a hell of a lot higher than that for the profoundly deaf. I do not have the figures because no one really finds them. The DWP—it used to drive me crazy when I was here before—will not slice the different disabilities up. It just says “problems with deafness and problems with visual impairment”, which completely denies the separateness of deafness. Off the bat, though, I would say that profoundly deaf people have an unemployment rate of around 70%, which is just ridiculous. How can we possibly have 100,000 people—if not more—of adult working age and have such barriers that 70% are unemployed? It is a blooming outrage! Now that I am back in the House, which is wonderful for the people of Eastbourne—I thank them—I am determined to lobby hard to make BSL an accepted language.

I am also keen to join the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse in lobbying on Access to Work. The Government have done a great thing with Access to Work—I think it was John Major’s Government that started it. Access to Work is a good thing which has made a huge difference to a lot of people, and I am a big supporter or it, but there is a challenge. It has made a great difference to people who are in work and acquire a disability through illness, a catastrophic incident or what have you. It has been fantastic in helping them to stay in work. I want it to be improved, particularly in the small and medium-sized enterprises sector, so that SMEs understand that they can employ people with disabilities. Access to Work provides a lot of the money that will buy an induction loop, put in a ramp, or do whatever is necessary to help an employer take on a disabled person. That is really important. Corporates kind of get it—they are huge, and they have massive human resources departments and pots of money, so they try to do their best. It is much harder for an SME to get it—they are huge, and they have massive human resources departments and pots of money, so they try to do their best. It is much harder for an SME employing three people. If I were the director of a plumber working seven days a week, and someone with a disability came to see me, it would be so much easier to say, “No, no,” and find an excuse not to employ them. Access to Work often provides the money that allows the SME to take on that disabled person.

I will let the House into a vast secret. I say this with authority, because I used to be a consultant in this area for years. If a business employs disabled people, they get lower churn.

**Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab) **rose**—

Stephen Lloyd: That is a very good example. I have no hearing on my left, so I could not hear the hon. Gentleman trying to intervene. Jim knows to punch me.

The hon. Gentleman is right. There are issues to do with Access to Work. As it has expanded and eaten a lot more money over the years, the Government—I am not chucking stones, as I know how challenging it is to work within the Budget envelope—have introduced more and more caps. Rather than focusing on different ways of capping Access to Work, I would like the DWP—the Minister can go back and tell his colleagues—to focus on better and more creative ways to use the money. I know from years of experience—colleges will have to take my word for it—that the majority of disabled people who get into a job, are properly managed and have the right support, stay there for years. That costs much less money than constantly having to re-employ. I thank the hon. Gentleman for the intervention.

I want to talk about two key areas that are specific to the Minister’s brief. One of the things I fought for last time I was here—I am going to do so now as the Minister is in Health—was an automatic invitation for a hearing aid screening whenever someone hits pension age. That would be at 65 or 66, although that was under the previous coalition—I think access to treatment age is 16. It is significant because something like 50% of people over the age of 65, heading up to 60% as they get older, begin to get age-onset hearing loss. My hearing loss is not age-onset, although I am old enough now—it was measles, as I said—and the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse is far too young, so his cannot possibly be age-onset. The thing with hearing loss is that the vast majority of people ignore it for 15 years because it is not a sexy disability. The hon. Member for Rochester and Strood flagged that up, and it is true. People start losing their hearing, they do not admit to it, their husband or wife goes potty, the volume is turned up massively on the television, and eventually their kids drag them to the audiology department, if it is still open—we will come to that—in their mid-70s.

The problem with that—there is significant data to prove this, which I will happily share with the Minister another time—is that the longer someone takes to get a hearing aid, the lower the chance of it working. The difference between a 75-year-old and a 65-year-old is huge in acuity terms is enormous. Hearing aids are not like glasses. If I cannot see properly, I put glasses on and I have 20:20 vision. Hearing aids do not replace lost sound; all they do is amplify the residual hearing. Let me try to explain that to colleagues very quickly. Imagine a radio with a battery that is running down. If the volume is turned up, it makes a lot more sound, but it is very discordant. That is what hearing aids do.

I was pressing very hard for the Department of Health to run a pilot so that all people who get to pensionable age receive an invite to audiology or wherever—it could be a pharmacy, for that matter—to have a hearing test. My rationale for that, which was supported by pretty much every group that could possibly be imagined, including NICE, was that if people get in early, they are forced to accept they are losing their hearing. They get a hearing aid, and ipso facto it is much easier to get used to. My view, which is shared by many others, is that that would be a huge advantage, not least in reducing the levels of dementia. We have discovered that dementia is linked to social isolation, and old people who are deaf or hard of hearing tend to isolate.
The Department of Health agreed in principle to run a pilot. It took me a long time to get that agreement, because the Department did not want to do it. It knew that I was right and all those extra hearing aids were going to cost a lot more money. Then there was a tragedy, colleagues: I lost the election. I was not there to nag like hell, and it sort of disappeared and was put on the back burner. I am delighted to see that my old colleague is now the Minister. I am sure that, now I have put that on the table, he will move heaven and earth to develop it into a pilot. It will make a huge difference to hundreds of thousands of people—I am deadly serious—so I encourage that.

It is easy to cut hearing aids, because it is mostly old people who use them. They are not organised and are not going to complain like hell; they are isolated, anyway. As I said, they are in their mid-70s by the time they go to audiology departments. I am pretty sure that a lot of CCGs are getting away with beginning to trim audiology services because there are not enough people fighting their corner. I know that CCGs are independent, but the Minister and I also know that there are protocols. In his response, I ask that he make a commitment that CCGs will be told how important audiology and hearing aids are. They must not use the austerity challenges they face to cut audiology. On that note, I again thank the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse for securing this debate.

2.28 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) on securing the debate. Colleagues have spoken very movingly about their personal experiences.

It is great to see my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) in his place as the responding Minister. I am sure he will do this ably, but it is an indication of the challenges that the hard-of-hearing and deaf community face that hon. Members have mentioned five Departments that have issues that need to be addressed: the Department of Health, the Department for Education, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Department for Work and Pensions. That shows that by working in departmental silos, there is perhaps a danger that some of challenges that we are hearing about today are not being properly addressed.

My hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse is a champion for the deaf and hard-of-hearing community. I will briefly highlight the work of another such champion, Ann Jillings, from Lowestoft, who is working with passion and determination to secure the best possible education for her son, Daniel. In doing so, she is campaigning for other parents of deaf children in north Suffolk. Daniel started at Bungay High School in September. He is doing well and there is good package of support in place for him, but Ann had to fight very hard to get that and she continues to campaign for a hearing impaired unit in north Suffolk.

It is clear that not just in Suffolk but across the country, deaf children do not get the right support right from the start, so they cannot always realise their full potential at school. That can put them at a considerable disadvantage for the rest of their lives. We need to break down these barriers and create a properly funded national framework, within which local education authorities such as Suffolk County Council can provide a good education and support service locally. If they do not do that, they must be held to account.

The National Deaf Children’s Society, which does great work campaigning for deaf children to have the same opportunities as everyone else, has highlighted four issues on which Government action is needed to break down the barriers that deaf children face. First, the NHS needs to improve the quality of children’s hearing services. The National Deaf Children’s Society highlighted in its Listen Up! campaign that, across the country, many such services have significant shortcomings and are failing to meet the necessary audiology standards. The quality assurance process that was previously in place has ended, and it has not been replaced by any other mandatory process.

The NDCS has a three-point action plan to address this particular problem. First, NHS England must ensure that the children’s audiology services that it directly commissions, such as for the under-fives, comply with the IQIPs—improving quality in physiological services accreditation programme. Secondly, it is vital that that programme is more transparent, so that families know whether their services are good quality or whether they need to improve. Thirdly, the accreditation must be compulsory, so that all paediatric audiology services move towards running a good-quality operation.

My second point relates to access to radio waves technology for deaf children. Radio aids play a vital role in helping deaf children to hear speech; they enable them to better understand their teacher, and they have a big impact on improving parent-child communication. Despite the obvious benefits, most local authorities do not currently make radio aids available for use by families in the home. The NDCS is calling on local authorities and the Department for Education to ensure that every child who could benefit from a radio aid is given access. That is one of the earliest possible opportunity. To do that, the Department for Education should encourage local authorities to make use of their special provision capital fund, to provide radio aids where they are needed.

My third point relates to the need for a GCSE in British Sign Language. The Government really must listen to the right to sign campaign, to make British Sign Language available as a GCSE that can be taught in school. Ann Jillings points out that it is the first language of deaf children, so it is discriminatory that deaf children do not have the opportunity to achieve what is probably the most widely recognised qualification, and that it is given a lower status than other languages. There are other accredited qualifications in British Sign Language, but they are not widely available to children in schools and they are less likely to be recognised by employers. Daniel Jillings achieved his BSL level 1 three years ago, but it was not funded. Ann tutored him and paid for all the assessments herself. There is a compelling case for a GCSE in BSL, based on equality, the denial of choice for deaf children and the unnecessary barrier that it poses to further and higher education, and thereafter, entry to the workplace. That barrier must be removed. A GCSE programme has already been piloted and is largely ready to go. The Department for Education must make an exception to its blanket policy of not allowing any new GCSEs to be developed.
My fourth and final point relates to the special educational needs and disabilities framework. The Children and Families Act 2014 made significant changes to the SEND framework. One key change was replacing SEND statements with EHC—education, health and care—plans. The deadline for implementing those changes is April next year. There is a concern that many schools and local education authorities are struggling to implement the changes in time. In Suffolk, Ofsted and the CQC identified weaknesses in the county council’s practices in meeting the requirements of the Act.

Authorities such as Suffolk must be provided with sufficient funding so that they can meet their obligations. Although the high needs block, which funds SEND support, has been protected in cash terms, it has not been adjusted to reflect a variety of additional challenges: the rising number of children and young people requiring additional support; the greater local authority responsibility for young children with SEND aged between 16 and 25 and in early years; and a trend towards placing more children in special schools. More money needs to be made available and Ofsted needs to review how it can strengthen the accountability framework around SEND and how it inspects schools.

Ann Jillings has gone that extra mile and works tirelessly to ensure that Daniel gets the opportunity to have the best possible start in life and the best possible education, so that he can realise his full potential. There have been many barriers that have been placed in her way in pursuit of that goal. I suggest that it is our duty, the duty of Government and of local authorities to remove those barriers as soon as possible.

2.37 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is a pleasure, as always, to see you in the chair, Mr McCabe. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) for securing this important debate. The contributions so far have been fantastic.

There are two issues in particular that affect deaf and hard-of-hearing people that I wish to raise today: the accreditation of children’s hearing services, and the cap on Access to Work scheme grants, which have already been mentioned. There are more than 50,000 deaf children across the UK and an estimated 794 deaf children in the Bristol area alone. For those children, high-quality audiology services are vital to carry out tests, fit and maintain hearing aids and provide rehabilitative support. Despite that, the Government have stopped mandatory inspections of services, instead replacing them with the improving quality in physiological services accreditation programme. Since the voluntary programme started in 2012, only 15% of children’s audiology services have achieved IQIPs accreditation. That means that 85% cannot guarantee that their service is good quality. That lack of transparency is unacceptable and leaves far too many families in the dark about the quality of their child’s audiology service. Obviously, it is of immense importance to parents that their children have access to good services. Some services have stepped up to the starting blocks by signing up to the scheme, such as St Michael’s Hospital in Bristol which serves my constituents, and a few are nearing the finish line and accreditation, but too many are not taking part at all.

The National Deaf Children’s Society, through its Listen Up! campaign, is calling on the Government and NHS England to make assessments of children’s audiology services mandatory and for information from these assessments to be publicly available. I support that campaign and implore the Government and NHS England to implement changes to help ensure that deaf children get the quality of service they deserve. That could make such a difference to their future life chances.

The second issue is the cap on Access to Work grants. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse, Access to Work enables many disabled people to overcome work-related obstacles by providing practical advice and support, and grants towards extra employment costs that cannot be met by employers as reasonable adjustments. A Government review in 2004—some time ago—suggested that for every £1 spent on Access to Work, £1.48 was generated for the Treasury. I am deeply concerned about the effects of the cap on Access to Work grants that the Department for Work and Pensions imposed for new claimants in 2015 on the career prospects of deaf and hard-of-hearing employees. That cap is due to come into force for existing claimants in April next year. It is currently set at £42,100 per year, which is one and a half times the national average salary. Although that may be enough support for some people, for others it is not.

I was contacted about this debate by a deaf constituent who uses British Sign Language and works as a disability advisor at an education establishment. Access to Work helps him participate fully and equally at work by paying the cost of communication support—namely, British Sign Language interpreters. Such support is inevitably expensive—it is necessary to pay people’s wages—so it is unlikely to be classed as a reasonable adjustment for his employer. At the moment, he can access those interpreters’ support throughout his working week. The cap means that he will be able to book interpreters for three days a week at most, leaving him with two days when he will not be able to communicate with his colleagues and clients. That means he will be unable to do his job effectively.

Access to Work revolutionised deaf people’s career opportunities, shattering the glass ceiling that previously limited them to manual jobs. It is largely due to Access to Work that deaf people have progressed as far as their talent allows. There are now deaf chief executive officers, deaf intermediaries working at the Ministry of Justice, deaf theatre directors and deaf social workers. Yet research conducted earlier this year by DeafATW found that the cap on Access to Work grants is already having a detrimental effect on the deaf community. We heard the figures from my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse. On behalf of my constituent and all those in the deaf community who have benefited or stand to benefit from that scheme, I implore the Minister to listen to what is being said, remove or raise the Access to Work cap, and once again lift the ceiling on the career aspirations of those who are deaf or hard of hearing.

2.43 pm

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe, and a pleasure to speak in a debate secured by my good friend the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick). We have been on many campaigns together over the years, not least in our previous careers.

I need to declare an interest at the outset. I have been honorary patron of the Hertfordshire Hearing
[Sir Mike Penning]  

Advisory Service—a fantastic charity that works not only in Hertfordshire but across many counties—for more than 10 years.

I disagree with hardly anything that has been said in this really positive debate. I think that people watching and others will realise that the House can work together not only for people who are hard of hearing, but for people who are hard of hearing and have other issues. We have not discussed the fact that people who are hard of hearing or deaf often have other ailments, which can be as difficult for them as being hard of hearing.

I can assure hon. Members from experience that Ministers usually do not like former Ministers to stand up and talk about things that they might know something about. For a short time, I was the disability Minister and responsible for Access to Work. Let me be positive about Access to Work and break some of the taboos about it. As we have heard, it is one of the great schemes for people across this great nation who had been left behind, ignored and told that they could not work. Employers told people that they could not employ them because it was not safe to do so. That was complete and utter rubbish. I do not have to take the hon. Gentleman’s word for it, because there is evidence in the Department for Work and Pensions that people with disabilities work harder, are more likely to turn up for work and are more dedicated and more committed than any other employees. That is a fact. We know that.

I went around the country as part of the disability confident scheme trying to encourage employers to take on people with all types of disabilities. That was pretty easy with bigger companies. There are some fantastic large companies out there—particularly Royal Mail. It gets biffed around a little at times in the House, but its large companies out there—particularly Royal Mail. It is easy with bigger companies. There are some fantastic

Jim Fitzpatrick: The right hon. Gentleman makes the same points that we have all made. Access to Work is a great scheme. It works. As I understand it, the logic for the cap is that there is only so much money in the pot—that is always the case for Governments—and therefore its purpose is to try to spread what is available as widely as possible. But for people with fantastic talent who could be advocates and champions for the deaf community by becoming chief executives and leaders of their professions and so on, the glass ceiling has been reinforced, because they can now get only £43,000. This is not a criticism—well, it is in some respects—but we need to ensure that the evidence is looked at regularly.

Sir Mike Penning: Governments need to be kicked and beaten up when they get things wrong and praised when they get things right. I was proud that a Conservative Government brought in the DWP, which is important. There will always be examples of abuse in the system and so on, but that does not give the Government carte blanche to say, “No, the only way this can work is with a cap,” particularly if the evidence does not show that a cap will work. The Minister will have looked twice when he came into the Chamber and realised what this debate would mostly be about, which is not his responsibility but the DWP’s. I am more than happy to go across to my old Department and sit with my old officials and explain to them exactly where the evidence is in their cupboards.

Let me touch briefly on two other areas, and then on one thing that has not been touched on at all. I do not understand why, in the 21st century, a recognised language is not recognised in the House or across the country. I really do not understand why, all these years after I made a point of order in the main Chamber in 2005 to complain that a hearing loop was not available for my constituents when they were in the House—even when it was installed, it did not work, which is an absolute scandal. There will always be examples of abuse in the Department process.

Stephen Lloyd: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for kicking off about the induction loop years ago, because I could not function as an MP in the Chamber without it.

Sir Mike Penning: The things I do for everybody in this House. It was genuinely embarrassing. I remember it vividly. I said to the Speaker, Michael Martin, “My constituents have come to see this world heritage site and their Parliament at work. I took them on a tour, and frankly they got hardly any benefit apart from visuals, because they couldn’t understand or hear a word I was saying.” I seem to remember that there was the comment, from a sedentary position, “Well, they didn’t miss very much,” but I was trying to get across a point. This is the mother of Parliaments, and as we have heard from colleagues, we are way behind the loop again. I am sorry to use that terrible pun, but we are really behind. I hope that we will have a lurch forward. I have noticed all the Clerks coming in, and have heard that the Speaker will be reported to, and all that, and that is great, but it is absolutely useless unless someone actually does something. Then we can move on. I know this is a trial, but signing should be transmitted live.
Secondly, there should be a GCSE. I find it fascinating: we can see all the different courses that our young people do in schools and colleges, yet they are excluded in this way. If people do not want any more GCSEs, we could drop one of the ones that would not get used anywhere near as much as this. It would make people aware. In my constituency, people who are not deaf or hard of hearing have said to me that they want to be able to communicate like this; they want to do these courses as well. They want to have a GCSE, so that they can chat away with their mates in that sort of way. That is a simple thing, and I cannot see huge cost implications, so it should be moved on, as we have heard this afternoon.

Finally, I will touch on people whose hearing has been impaired by industrial injuries. That has not been mentioned at all in the debate, but because people think it should not be. It is just one of those issues. People cannot see this type of industrial injury. It is not like the industrial injuries that my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse and I saw in our former jobs as firemen. There is something very wrong about how we measure industrial injuries, and hearing impairment industrial injuries in particular. So many people who have a hearing impairment do not admit it to themselves, their wives and their loved ones, even though their wives and loved ones are probably aware that there is an issue. They certainly do not talk about it to their employer or previous employers.

I can talk about this, because my eardrum is perforated. I did not know about that until I started to miss conversations that I thought I should be picking up. You just do not think there is something wrong. However, when I was a Minister at the Ministry of Defence, I had to have a medical before I was allowed to go into operational fields, and it was obvious that I had a perforated eardrum. It was almost certainly from live firing when I was in the armed forces—the specialists told me that—although it was not picked up then. That is not so important to me, but where industrial injuries are common, it is massively important that there be a level playing field on decibel levels. Completely different levels are used for hearing damage in the armed forces and what I call civvy street, and that cannot be right.

We must encourage people to come forward, not so much so that they can get compensation, but because, as we heard earlier, if we can pick this up earlier, it saves the state and everyone a lot of money, and also makes life much better for that person, who can start to accept the disability that they have and continue to live a happy life.

[Ms Karen Buck in the Chair]

Jim Fitzpatrick: When I had the hearing test that identified my audiological loss, as the right hon. Gentleman will know, the printout showed whether it was down to age or genetics, or whether it was industrial. Mine was at least partly industrial. I was told by my clinicians, “Your hearing loss is above the threshold for applying for industrial injury compensation.” I never did, because I had a great job here, so I did not have to, and it was not a matter of money. I have always felt a bit difficult about saying, “Well, I should have gone down as a statistic.” I am sure that, as the right hon. Gentleman says, there are a lot of us out there who have not registered and do not appear in the statistics. The base statistics are only of the people who absolutely needed to make sure that they registered.

Sir Mike Penning: Thank you very much—not Mr McCabe, but Ms Buck; I did a quick double-take. My hon. Friend has hit the nail on the head. It is not just about the money. Getting people in, whether at pensionable age or when they leave an employer or the armed forces, is vital. When I left the armed forces, my hearing was not tested. It was supposed to have been tested, but it was not, and if anyone can find a record of it being tested then, I can take them on about that. I am not raising the issue of whether people are entitled to compensation—that is someone else’s decision—but they are not entitled to compensation unless we get them tested. If we can get them tested, the specialists will know, as my hon. Friend said, the cause of the deafness. There are myriad reasons, but industrial damage is pretty well defined.

I am thrilled that there are so many people here on a Thursday afternoon—the other Chamber probably has half, if not less than half, the amount of people we have here. Perhaps my hon. Friend and I might go back to the Backbench Business Committee to get a proper debate on the Floor of the House on some of the specifics we have discussed. If necessary, that should be moved on, as we have heard this afternoon.

Secondly, there should be a GCSE. I find it fascinating: “Today, I will talk to you about deafness and hearing loss in Scotland.”

I will come back to my poor attempt at signing later. I wanted to speak about a number of things, many of which have already been mentioned. I very much welcome this debate and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) on bringing it here. Indeed, I commend him on the work he has done through the all-party parliamentary group on deafness to raise this issue across the House.

There are approximately 1 million people in Scotland who suffer hearing loss, and I am one of them. About 15 years ago, I found that my hearing was deteriorating, and I did not do much about it—I was just very irritating to my friends and family, not hearing things. Eventually, I was persuaded to get treatment. I was diagnosed with degeneration in the inner ear, an inherited trait that means that I cannot hear some frequencies, but I can hear others. I hear some frequencies at full volume, and others at just 30% or 40%, which means I lose a lot of the sense of what people are saying to me.

I am beyond grateful to NHS Lothian and our public health service for what it has been able to do for me. I wear hearing aids, like my hon. Friend, and the degree of technology and sophistication in these little things is quite remarkable. There are mini-computers in here that take in all frequencies and decide to boost the ones that I am weak on, which means that, by and large, I can hear relatively normally. I also want to place on record the efforts of the House authorities. In particular, I find theloop in the Chamber very effective indeed.

Of course, there are still drawbacks; those who, like me, wear hearing aids will be aware of this. For example, when I am in the Chamber talking, do not have them on the setting for the loop, if a colleague sitting beside me says something, I do not get it; I have to reprogramme the aid and try to find out what they
were saying—or quite often I just nod and pretend I got the gist of what they were saying. I also notice that these aids can be irritating to me and others in close proximity, because of the feedback and whistling sound there is sometimes, but it is worth putting up with those minor drawbacks to take advantage of this great technology.

I got these hearing aids on the NHS, and I was very grateful indeed to receive them. These instruments are state-of-the-art technology that match anything available in the private sector. In fact, I have friends who, either through inclination or ignorance, decided to go private, and went to agencies on the high street that retail hearing aids, and their service is far inferior to mine. Eventually, on my advice, they went to the local audiology department and got better treatment.

That is just part of why I have a particular interest in the subject. I am of course also mindful that this is probably one of the most common disabilities that we as a species suffer. More of my constituents probably suffer hearing loss than voted for me on 8 June; that is how prevalent it is.

I want to spend a little time, because others have mentioned it, talking about the situation in Scotland, particularly with regard to BSL. Any BSL users watching what I did at the beginning will understand that I cannot sign, but I tried to learn that opening line because I know that, as time goes on, I will want to learn BSL, as it will be something that I rely on in later years and is therefore important to me, but it is important to me in the here and now because of so many people for whom BSL is a vital means of communication.

It has already been mentioned that in 2015 the Scottish Parliament passed the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act. A Labour MSP decided to bring it to Parliament. The Act was passed unanimously, with all five parties in full agreement. A key thing that the Act did was launch a process to establish a national action plan to promote and develop BSL in Scotland, with the simple objective of making Scotland the best place in the world to be a BSL user and to live, work and play. I say that not to blow Scotland’s trumpet, although it is part of my brief to do that, and not to say that Scotland is better than the rest of the UK, but simply to say that if people took the time and sat down to talk about these things and drew up a plan, they would be surprised at how much can be done. I ask the Minister and the Government to look at the situation as it is developing in Scotland and perhaps see how much of that could be replicated UK-wide.

The national plan was published in September. It is quite detailed and has 70 targets. I will not go into them all; it is available on the Scottish Government website. The process was really important. Once time is provided in a Parliament for a discussion that leads to legislation, because of the statutory force of the discussions taking place, things that people had never thought about begin to go on the agenda and come out of the woodwork. It is a stimulus to all manner of people in civic society and in Government agencies in thinking about how they can improve the situation.

The plan of action has 70 detailed targets set for the next three years. I will give Members a flavour of them. The first is to look at how we can build into the 2021 census a question or series of questions that identify in detail the number of BSL users taking part in the census, so that we have the data on which to plan in future. Target 10 talks about improving access to early years services, so that deaf children can access them. Target 16 is about removing the barriers that prevent BSL users from becoming teachers, so that they can not only teach in the medium of BSL, but teach hearing kids through interpretation. Target 25 is about targets for colleges and universities. Importantly, the next target makes loans available for BSL students. I am pleased to say that just this week the Scottish Government announced that loans will be available for students in Scotland to study throughout the UK if the course is not available in Scotland, so we now have a situation in which we can support BSL users who are students in Scotland, but who are able to go on courses in England and Wales as well.

Target 39 is about making sure that all our health screening and immunisation programmes have the medium of BSL built into them, so that BSL users have full access. Target 48 is about sport, and 53 is about placing obligations on transport and our rail and bus providers to make sure they understand the needs of BSL users and have it available as a means of communication. Target 57 is about access to the arts. Target 63 is about making sure that our emergency services understand the needs of BSL users and have a facility to be able to communicate with them. Finally, the last one I picked out is the target to improve electoral participation and voting in the political process by BSL users.

There is a series of very good targets, but probably the best thing about them is the way in which BSL users themselves have bought into the process and have become part of developing the action plan. A full £1.3 million has been provided to various deaf voluntary organisations to monitor how the targets develop and are implemented. In 2020 the intention is to come back with a full Government review across all agencies to make sure we look at the next stage. Those are practical, achievable steps that can be taken, many of which do not involve a lot of money. They can be done within existing budgets. They require changes in attitudes. We cannot overestimate the importance of having a statutory framework and setting all these things down as targets for Government agencies.

There is always pressure on a legislative programme, but a UK BSL Act that would do some of those things would not take a lot of parliamentary time. It need not be a very complicated Bill. It could be focused. Even if we had to give up three hours of a Back-Bench debate or two to get the measure through, it would be worth doing. I am sure that if the Government were to take the initiative, they would find all parties commending them.

Several people have mentioned Access to Work, but it is important to stress that claimants who had the benefit of the programme and were not limited until now—the target applied to new claimants—will be subject to the cap as well. That will mean that some people who are in employment will have to reduce or leave their employment. That is the truth of the matter. It might not be a great number of people, but that is what will happen.

I note that the DWP says that only about 267 people will be affected by the cap. That is not a great number, but it really looks like penny-pinching when we compare it to the scale of the DWP budget.
Jim Fitzpatrick: The early statistics said that for every £1 spent on Access to Work, the Treasury got a cost-benefit analysis plus of £1.34 or £1.50. A lot of the people the hon. Gentleman describes are senior professionals, chief executives and so on, who will be on a 40% rate of tax, so it is an investment that will give the Treasury more money back than the basic rate of tax does.

Tommy Sheppard: I could not agree more. If somebody is in work and gets support through the scheme, not only are they earning money and paying tax, but the people who support them earn money and pay tax as well. There are all sorts of ways in which this makes sense. My key point is that given the small number of people affected, is the cap really worth it? Would it not be better to not have the cap, and assess the situation later? It is expensive because of the nature of the support that people need in this part of the programme if they are deaf and a BSL user. It is expensive because that support is undertaken by hard-working professional people such as the signers here today, who have trained very hard for the job that they do.

Perhaps in the future developments in audio technology and computer graphics will be such that we will get an app on our smartphone that will turn speech into sign in a way that works, but who knows? That is for the future. For now, we need professional human beings to be able to provide the service. We should accept as a society that for the limited number of people affected, the money is a price worth paying. We could perhaps look at other ways, rather than the cap and restricting the services provided, to reduce costs.

I want to finish by talking about Parliament and some of the things that we might be able to do here. It is wonderful that we have our proceedings signed today. I do not know why we do not have a signer standing beside the Speaker’s Chair and filmed for all the proceedings in our Parliament. When we think of the amount of money we spend in this place, the number of staff that we have, the amount we spend on maintenance and the amount we are going to spend on refurbishment, it is not such a big price to make sure that during the 30 hours a week or whatever when the Chamber is in operation and debating, there is a signer there, signing for the people in the Chamber, and, more importantly, for the people who watch live online or wish to check back on proceedings.

Another thing that we could do has to do with the scheme in Parliament, which Members may be aware of—I have not taken advantage of it yet, but I am sure others have—to get tuition in a foreign language. Why do we not add BSL to that? Why does not each MP have an opportunity to learn that as part of our professional development as Members of Parliament, so that we are better able to communicate with our constituents, and more aware of the technological needs?

My central point, which I will stress as I end, is that it is impossible to overestimate the importance of a legislative framework, because of the sense of purpose it creates for civil society and statutory agencies, and the sense of worth, I suppose, that it gives to people who are looking to us to respond to their needs.

3.10 pm

Teresa Pearce (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Buck. I too express gratitude to my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), not just for obtaining the debate, but for the work he has done on deafness and hearing loss for many years; he is a great champion of the cause. I also want to mention the hon. Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst), who shared her personal story. I was struck by what she said about her mother’s isolation, because my late mother-in-law was one of the most sociable people anyone could meet—show her a piano and she would play for two hours—but then she lost her hearing, and with that, she lost her social circle and became incredibly lonely. We hear a lot about elderly people being lonely, and I wonder how much hearing loss has to do with that.

The debate is very broad—as broad as the challenges that people living with deafness face; so I shall confine my remarks to two areas, the first of which is cochlear implants. A constituency case has been brought to me by several constituents, including the grandmother of Jacob, who needs a cochlear implant. He is profoundly deaf in the right ear and severely deaf in the left; he is four years old. He has been tested by St. Thomas’ Hospital cochlear implant team, who supported the case for an implant, but the NHS has turned him down. The family have been told he can have the implant only if they can raise £44,000. My constituents are not the most affluent in the country, but they are truly wonderful, and this will not be the first time they have crowd-funded help for someone. Last year they helped a young mother to get a second stem cell transplant. Their campaign, “Help Jacob Hear”, has run boot sales, raffles and fêtes and raised nearly all the money, which is great news—but it raises the question of what the NHS is for if it is not to help children such as Jacob. The spending of taxpayers’ money at this point would potentially be handsomely repaid over the lifetime of that young boy. It might be expensive, but what is the financial and social expense of not funding it?

The second area I wanted to focus on is Access to Work. Quite a number of my constituents are British Sign Language interpreters, and many of them have written to me. One, Joanna, works regularly with people who are helped by Access to Work to participate equally and fully at work. In 2015 the DWP, as has been mentioned, imposed a cap on Access to Work awards, and Joanna is worried that the cap will act as a glass ceiling on deaf colleagues’ and friends’ career aspirations. Those with hearing loss will not be able to apply for promotions or look to develop their career, because the Access to Work support will not be sufficient. That means that they will be able to book interpreters for perhaps only three days a week. What will happen on the other two days? Deaf professionals are left at a disadvantage, experiencing stress and frustration as it leads to their being removed from viable career paths. The consequences can be reduction of their working hours and in some cases complete removal from employment. There are self-employed deaf professionals in the arts who have not been able to develop projects, because of lack of access. Research done by the group DeafATW with people whose awards have been capped already or are due to be capped next year, shows a negative impact on careers and aspiration. Especially affected are deaf people who are in or who aspire to professional, managerial or leadership roles, or those who are self-employed and who run their own business.

Another of my constituents, Andrew, is deaf. He uses British Sign Language and works as a senior team administrator with Surrey County Council. Access to
Work pays for the interpreters and note-taking that make it possible for him to communicate with colleagues, customers and others, and help him to participate more fully and equally at work, even though it does not stretch to providing assistance at longer meetings where it is impossible to focus on the interpreter and to take notes at the same time. That said, it is likely that the support that Andrew gets via Access to Work, which we all agree is a fantastic system, is much more than what would be seen as a reasonable adjustment for his employer to make. Access to Work has revolutionised the career opportunities for people like Andrew, and shattered the glass ceiling that previously often limited people to doing manual jobs. It has ensured progression for deaf people that is based on talent, which is as things should be. There are now deaf chief executives, deaf intermediaries working at the Ministry of Justice, deaf theatre directors, deaf social workers and a deaf senior team administrator at Surrey County Council. I am concerned that a new policy will undo that good work.

In September DeafATW ran a survey among deaf people about Access to Work. Among those who will be subject to the Access to Work cap from 2018, nearly half said they would not apply for promotion in future, because they were worried that in a new job they would not have enough communication support as a result of the cap. For the same reason, a fifth said that they had already had opportunities to apply for promotion, but had not done so. Nearly half said that they would stay with their current employer as long as possible, because they were worried about what a new employer might think about the effect of the cap on their ability to do their job. When talking about growth we hear a lot about the “productivity puzzle”. It is not much of a puzzle really if we are limiting where people’s talent can take them with such a cut.

In about a third of cases, the employer was either taking or thinking about taking action to check whether the individual could still do their job properly. Deaf people fear that having a capped award means that they will not be able to do their job properly, and employers are concerned about it too. As a consequence, deaf people, whether they are already subject to a cap, are expecting to be subject to one in 2018, or are without a cap in their current work, have said that they are already avoiding applying to work in professional, managerial and senior roles.

In 2015, the Government were clear that a key challenge in administering Access to Work was managing a demand-led programme within a defined budget. They said “We must achieve a balance between meeting customer need and achieving value for money for the taxpayer. It has been a long-standing aspiration of the programme to support more disabled people into work, so we must address the challenge of supporting this growth whilst keeping Access to Work affordable”.

I would say that it is money well spent. I could not find more recent figures, but the Sayce report in 2011 said that for every pound spent £1.48 came back to the Treasury. That is clearly a case of spending to save.

The Minister may be aware that in July 2015 the Government responded to the Work and Pensions Committee report entitled “Improving Access to Work for disabled people”. The report was scathing about the statistics, stating: “This lack of transparency is unacceptable. We recommend that DWP change its approach to Access to Work statistics and that, as a minimum, it regularly publish the following information: an indicative annual budget; annual expenditure outturns, broken down by support element and impairment type (including autism spectrum disorders); the number of service users by size of employer; and employers’ mandatory and voluntary financial contributions, broken down by size of employer.”

In their response, the Government admitted that there was work to do to meet those requirements. Will the Minister now, or perhaps by writing to me, update us on progress with the Access to Work statistics? The previous Minister said that there were a lot of statistics available, so I should be pleased to know what progress has been made in supplying the information. Will the Minister also provide figures to show the trend in the number of deaf people supported by Access to Work prior to the introduction of the cap, and afterwards?

The Select Committee also highlighted a particularly strong case for the DWP to improve the accessibility of its disability-related services, recommending that it introduce a video relay system to enable deaf BSL users to contact the Department more easily. Has there been any progress on that? By way of a reminder, I noticed when I arrived that there is a signer for the debate, and I recalled that when the Work and Pensions Committee undertook a review of Access to Work in 2015, we had a sitting when deaf people came to give evidence, and there were deaf people in the Public Gallery, and no one had thought to book a signer. Luckily, one of my constituents had come to watch. He was a qualified signer, and he took over and helped us. In this place, sometimes we do things very well and sometimes we overlook things. If a Work and Pensions Committee looking into accessibility for deaf people did not think to have a signer, it goes to show that we must do better on this. Today’s debate is a step forward.

3.20 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Buck.

I am sure most of us know many people who are affected to some degree by hearing loss, and we know the impact it has on their lives. In my own case, both my parents were affected. My dad, who died a couple of years ago, had industrial deafness caused by his work in a factory. The effects of that lasted a long time. I welcome the comments from the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), recognising the industrial injuries aspect. My mum resisted hearing aids for many years, but the difference they made to her life when she finally gave in was, and continues to be, immense. It is immense to us as well, of course.

That is why I was so concerned to hear from Action on Hearing Loss, which I met recently, that some clinical commissioning groups are proposing restrictions on the prescription of hearing aids to people with mild and moderate hearing loss. Indeed, some have already done so, including North Staffordshire CCG, which was referred to earlier. Not only do hearing aids make a real difference to people with mild and moderate hearing loss, but research shows that they reduce social isolation and depression. New evidence also suggests they can reduce the risk of developing dementia; a study in The Lancet has recognised hearing loss as potentially the largest modifiable risk factor for dementia. We can do something about it. I hope the Minister will make clear that hearing aids must be provided where they are needed.
As my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) has clearly set out, the cash limit on the Access to Work scheme has also had a significant impact on many people with hearing loss, limiting their ability to do their job properly, or in some cases meaning that they might not be offered jobs because of the shortfall in financial support. I ask the Government to look again at removing or raising the cap. I also echo my hon. Friend’s call for further work on implementation of the action plan on hearing loss. As he described, some good work has been done already, but I ask the Minister to ensure that the Government step up their work on implementing the plan.

In the summer, I met Erin, a young woman campaigning with the National Deaf Children’s Society to have British Sign Language recognised as a GCSE and made available to all students. I join Erin, and the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), in calling for BSL to be a GCSE subject.

3.22 pm
Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Ms Buck. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) for securing this debate. This is one of those occasions when the only suitable ministerial and departmental response to the words spoken in the debate is urgent action to review, reconsider and change course. That means helping deaf people, working across Government instead of in silos, and putting deaf people at the centre of the decision-making process. I include an important area that people have talked about quite a lot today: the Department for Work and Pensions, where Access to Work needs to be promoted, not capped. Unfortunately, that cap will affect so many of our deaf and hard of hearing constituents when we come to the end of the grace period in April 2018.

I am the eldest child of deaf parents, and I was their voice and ears from a very young age. That was invaluable to them, enabling them to be easily heard and understood in a hearing world. My dad was born deaf and my mum became deaf at four years of age. I say that I was kidnapped by the deaf community at birth, because my culture, language and community are theirs. That poses me some difficulties on occasion, because I can be very straightforward in the way I deal with matters. My first language is BSL, not Sign Supported English—most people think that is BSL, but it is not.

I was tempted to sign my whole speech. I was going to do that and have the interpreters voice over my comments for my colleagues, to give everybody a feel for how it is not to be able to communicate directly—not for a minute, not for a sentence, but for five minutes or however long it takes me to finish this speech. Not to be able to communicate directly with the person we are talking to is really, really strange and difficult. Deaf people feel and experience that every single minute of their lives.

My experiences and the communication difficulties I saw led me, when I was Lord Mayor, to provide every deaf person in Liverpool with a minicom. We paid for them by getting children in schools to learn the deaf alphabet. They saw it as a secret language and really enjoyed it, and I got minibooms for everybody who was deaf in Liverpool. Some might ask why that was so important. We talk about isolation, but even though I thought, as a product of that environment, that I understood it, I came home with a minicom for my dad and gave it to him. He looked at it and was so happy, and then he took it and pressed “Nine... nine...” I said, “Whoa!” and he said, “Who else can do it?” Nobody else has got one, only the emergency services and the doctor.” I thought, “Right, I get the message: every deaf person in Liverpool needs one.” That made me realise that I needed to get on with it and get everybody a minicom.

Mobile phones have improved the situation, but as the hon. Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) has outlined, we are not progressing with transmission services as we should. I have known Chris Jones for many years, and it is a really important thing, but the agenda is so large that we need Ministers across Government to start tackling it quickly. Being able to communicate is fundamental to someone doing their job and doing a good job. The evidence is clear that Access to Work is a system that enables deaf people, particularly those who use BSL, to use their own voices in the workplace, with the communication support they need.

When I think about it, I am probably one of the first examples. My dad was a plasterer and he was so good—I genuinely mean that—that directors of building companies, since they could not phone him, used to come to my house and sit down around the table. As a child, from the age of eight or nine onwards, I used to sit on a Friday night and instead of all the millions of bits of paper going back and forth, I was drafted in to be the person from Access to Work. My dad did really well. He kept getting more and more money. They wanted him, the prices went up, and I did that every few months.

To me, the evidence is clear: the cap does not simply hinder deaf people’s ability to do their jobs, but will cause them to turn down employment offers and promotions. It might have meant that my dad did not get such a good deal on his next contract. It leaves self-employed people in a precarious position, where the small profits they have worked hard to earn go toward expensive interpretation costs. That is absolutely not a cost-effective way to work. The UK Council on Deafness found that nearly half of those whose income will be capped in April said that they would not even apply for promotion in future because they worried that they would not receive enough communication support. That presents barriers to those aspiring to careers in professional, managerial and senior roles. I have a friend who was the headteacher of a deaf school. Without support, how will that happen in the future?

We need to allow deaf people to progress as far as their talent allows. I have spoken to many other deaf people in lower roles but who aspire to do better. They have stopped looking forward and now live every day in fear that they may lose the job they have. Every day is a challenge, especially if they lose that support for two days a week. We must all be clear that deafness is not a limiting learning disability. There is no reason why deaf people cannot secure employment in senior roles, so long as Government decisions do not dampen down the support that they require.

Central Government just cannot sit back in the hope that employers and the self-employed will simply make up that two-day deficit in support costs that the cap is estimated to impose, especially when employers are already saying that they are not confident about their businesses employing a person with a hearing loss. We simply cannot waste huge swathes of talent. I know
that, because my dad, who was born deaf, was probably one of the greatest men I have ever known. He was fantastically clever, and he was deaf, but that did not prevent him from doing anything—and we should not allow it to.

Does the Minister accept that the cap reimposes limits on the ambitions and financial security of deaf people, and leaves the next generation without the belief or ability to succeed in a 21st century workplace? They can. My dad has died now—he was 91—but he did it before; he was a trailblazer. Do not stop the new trailblazers. Help them to forge ahead.

It is also vital that the Minister recognises that, outside this place, the majority of British citizens and employers lack awareness of Access to Work. That really helps to explain why a recent labour force survey found that 30% of working-age people who identify themselves as having a hearing loss are not employed; I actually believe the proportion is higher than that. Does he recognise the need for a single gateway that would provide assistance and advice for employers seeking Access to Work support for their employees who are deaf or have a hearing loss?

I have listened to people refer to deafness as an invisible handicap, and it absolutely is; it is an invisible disability. However, that also means it is an easy target for cuts, especially in the NHS, Education and the DWP. We must guard against taking that easy, quick solution in the hope that deaf people and the hard of hearing will not be able to articulate the anger they feel at their treatment. I have two hearing aids, and I ask the Minister: if my hearing deteriorated to such an extent that I needed communication support to do my job as an MP, would these rules enable me to do the job effectively? If not, how is everybody else supposed to do their jobs under these rules? Do the rules not jeopardise employment, rather than helping to increase it within the deaf and hard of hearing community?

On a slightly different subject, as I said before, my first language was sign language, and I was delighted that the Labour party general election manifesto earlier this year committed to giving BSL full legal recognition. That would improve the structures and the expectation of full language access, through fully qualified interpreters, in all aspects of public life. However, that leads to a question: if the Government do not value interpreters, how will that encourage people to take up those roles?

What will we do if people do not learn BSL and are not there as interpreters? We already have cases of unqualified people interpreting in courts. That is wrong. They have no idea about deaf culture or the nuances and what people really mean. There is a difference between somebody who is just learning sign language and somebody who is really fluent or speaks it as a first language and understands what a deaf person is really saying. We need to value those interpreters.

My final question to the Minister is: does he agree that legal recognition will provide another means of improving awareness of deafness and of the barriers that deaf people and those with hearing loss deal with in the workplace? We need to ensure that Access to Work is extended to many more employers than the current minuscule few who actually use it. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s reply. Ultimately, he will be judged on the ability of the deaf community and those with hearing loss to succeed and to realise their potentials. That means in every part of their lives—particularly in the workplace, education and health, because without those things, what are we to do? Please give them the same chances that we get.

3.35 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck, and to take part in this important debate secured by the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick). It has been a consensual debate across the Chamber, which is extremely welcome.

This will be the first time that my words have ever been signed, as well as it being the first time in a parliamentary debate; I certainly hope it becomes a regular feature in Parliament. It would be nice if the signing was on the live feed, not only on the re-broadcast. I do not know whose remit that is in—perhaps the parliamentary authorities or the Administration Committee could discuss it further with the broadcasters to see how best we can implement that. Again, I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing the debate; it is a tremendous first. I echo the calls from the hon. Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) that providing sign language interpretation should become a regular feature.

Various Members have discussed the multiplicity of Departments responsible for this sphere. If that is not simplified, there certainly seems to be a need for there to be, at the very least, a clear, identified lead Department. That may be an easier route. We have heard of the many day-to-day difficulties experienced by those who are hard of hearing—one person in six is affected, and they are less likely to be in employment. On the one hand, it is welcome news that technology is making it easier for people suffering from deafness to work, while, on the other, it is worrying that the cap on Access to Work support has disproportionately impacted on those with hearing loss. That point has been well made and I do not need to emphasise it further; the cost-benefit ratio of £1 spent to £1.48 received says it all, in financial terms.

Various Members have given their personal stories and accounts, such as the hon. Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst). I am also grateful to the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) for the case he identified, which put a very human dimension on to the issue. I cannot imagine what it would be like to not hear family or listen to music; I have no comprehension of how awful that would be. However, there are ways that we can help people, and we should do everything we can to ensure a better quality of life for everyone. Indeed, that is effectively the challenge of today: to ensure that deaf people can be fully involved in daily and public life as active, healthy citizens who can make informed choices about every aspect of their own lives.

My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) covered much of what happens in Scotland, but I will mention a few of the points again. The Scottish Government have a British Sign Language national plan, which, as has been said, aims to make Scotland the best place in the world for BSL users to live, work and visit. It seems to be a regular feature
in debates that I am always telling people to visit my constituency, so I might as well emphasise this again: it is a great place, and if hon. Members have not been, they should come.

The British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015 requires public bodies in Scotland to publish plans for how they will promote and support BSL every six years. The first national plan covers the Scottish Government, and other public bodies, including councils, NHS boards, colleges and universities, will publish plans next year. The national plan, which runs from 2017-23, is the first of its kind in the UK and sets out 10 long-term goals for BSL in Scotland, covering early years and education, training and work, health, mental health and wellbeing, transport, culture and the arts, justice and democracy.

It describes 70 actions Scottish Ministers will take by 2020, whereafter a progress report shall be published and a further set of actions for delivery by 2023 will be identified. My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East mentioned several of those key actions, so I will not repeat them.

However, I can think of a 71st action that might feed into the next round for the Scottish Government and might be one we should take forward in this Parliament, and that is what we as individual elected Members do to facilitate that. In preparing for the debate, I thought about what we do on home visits and for people visiting our constituency offices. There are a number of issues, and we may need parliamentary guidance on how best to service all our constituents with their inquiries.

In Scotland, a lot of it is about attitude, but our plan is also backed up by money: £1.3 million has been put in to support it. That is not a grand amount, but it is enough to do a fair amount of work. Dr Terry Riley, chair of the British Deaf Association, said that the Scottish Government’s national plan is “a brilliant example for the rest of the United Kingdom to follow.”

I hope that Ministers will have a look at what we are doing in Scotland. I have a copy of the plan here, if anyone wants it. I am not hard of hearing, but I am poor of vision, and I am pleased to say that the plan is in quite large print, so it suits the likes of myself to a tee.

It is not just through the BSL national plan that the Scottish Government are taking action to help. The disability delivery plan is another way that we can help by removing barriers and promoting independent living, with a key target being a reduction in the employment gap between disabled people and the rest of the population. It has been highlighted today that deaf people are not in as great an employment position as other members of society.

The Scotland Act 2016 devolved a number of powers to set up employment schemes to assist those at risk of becoming long-term unemployed and to help disabled people into work, including schemes that seek to help employers to find suitable employees. As a result, Fair Start Scotland will operate from 2018 for three years, with the aim of helping a minimum of 38,000 people into work. I hope that a number of those will be deaf people and those who are hard of hearing.

At a UK level, more needs to be done to address the gender, race and disability pay gap and tackle pay inequality and occupational segregation. To that end, I support extension of pay gap reporting to cover gender, race and disability. I am keen to hear the Minister’s thoughts on that. Better and more statistics could help us greatly in this cause.

I would also like to hear from the Minister on EU law, which has played a huge role in upholding the rights of disabled people. Those rights must be protected post-Brexit. There are many examples, but of particular importance to the deaf community are the employment equality directive of 2000 and the public sector websites and mobile applications directive of 2016, which requires public sector bodies to ensure that their websites and mobile apps comply with accessibility standards so that they can be used by disabled people.

As well as protecting existing EU measures, it is important to ensure that the UK is not left behind. For example, the European Accessibility Act is being negotiated at an EU level. The Equality and Human Rights Commission has said that the Act will benefit disabled people by providing common rules on accessibility in relation to computers and operating systems, ATMs, ticketing and check-in machines, smartphones, TV equipment related to digital television services, telephony services and related equipment. It would be great to know what the UK proposals are for those areas in the future. It would be tremendous if the Minister looked into that.

There is much we can learn from different countries. My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East and I have mentioned what is happening in Scotland, and the hon. Member for Milton Keynes South mentioned some of the things happening in Australia. There is a lot we can learn, and I look forward to hearing the other winding-up speeches and seeing this go further forward.

3.43 pm

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) for bringing this important subject to our attention.

I begin by saying how delighted I am to see that we have a signer in the room. It must be really easy for us to extend that service across the business of the House—that would be a really quick win, I think we all agree.

It is a real privilege to respond to the debate on behalf of the Opposition. I have been genuinely moved by some of the powerful and personal speeches we have heard today. They prepared me far better for my contribution than the research I did ahead of the debate. We can look at the statistics, such as the fact that 11 million people in the UK are living with deafness, but we have heard today about the extent of it. The hon. Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst) courageously shared a very personal story and enriched the debate. We thank her for that. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McCafferty) talked movingly of his constituent. We heard about a family having to raise £44,000 to let a little four-year-old boy have a chance in life.

I think we all agree that we must do more. The best thing about the debate is that it has raised awareness of a massive issue. We are talking about deafness and hearing loss, people who we are born deaf, and people who become deaf, sometimes through illness and sometimes through the ageing process, and how are we going to support them all, beginning with the children. The fact
that only a third of screening processes for newborn babies are up to standard and accredited is of great concern. That needs to be addressed, and soon.

Bearing in mind that 50,000 children in the UK are deaf, we must serve them well and make sure they are not isolated. We must make sure that their isolation does not begin with being isolated from their parents. The majority—90%—of children born deaf are born to hearing parents. If their parents are not supported, there are implications for the child’s language development. We know there are ways of providing support, such as radio aids, and we must make that available to parents and support them. We hear a lot in the House about early intervention for all children to address all issues in the early years, and there can be no more important an issue to address than this.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) stressed powerfully that deaf children and deaf adults do not have learning disabilities. Our education system must address this. It cannot be right that deaf children are 42% less likely to get five decent GCSEs. We are hindering their progress for life at that early stage. I was alarmed to learn that since 2011, the number of specialist teachers for the deaf has reduced by 12%. That cannot be the right way forward.

Members have rightly stressed the importance of British Sign Language. I have to admit, I never realised until this week—I never thought it through, and I am sure I am not the only one—that British Sign Language is some people’s first language. I thought of it as something separate that helped, but this debate has increased my awareness. The more this is talked about, the better. It is vital that BSL is taken seriously and given recognition. The UK is a signatory to the UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities, but we must do more and give this language the equal validation it deserves. Why can British Sign Language not be a GCSE subject? I know this is beyond the remit of the Minister and his Department, but I am sure he will pass it on to his colleagues in the Department for Education. If BSL were a GCSE subject, people would take it seriously, more people would learn it and there would be more access to it, and therefore deaf people would be able to participate more fully.

Members have rightly mentioned the human cost as well as the financial cost of isolation not being addressed. The health statistics are quite clear—for example, on the number of people who retire early or suffer from anxiety and depression because they can no longer cope in the world of work. As has been mentioned, many elderly people who lose their hearing lose their social circle and cannot communicate with family. There is the cost of not supporting them with hearing aids and, as the hon. Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) mentioned, with a telecommunications relay service. We should be looking into such systems to maximise inclusion for old people.

The world of work is obviously a massive issue. The Access to Work scheme is absolutely brilliant. It is shocking that it is probably the DWP’s best kept secret. I recently hosted a Disability Confident employers event, and many of the employers admitted that they had not known about the scheme at all. There are two aspects to the world of work when it comes to deafness. The person who is deaf or hard of hearing needs support to cope at work, and the employer—in particular, the small or medium-sized employer—needs support to understand that that need not disadvantage their business. As has rightly been mentioned—I think my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East said this—when a disabled person is employed and supported in their workplace, it reduces workforce churn. The support does not have to be expensive. Sometimes it is about awareness, moving someone’s seat so that they can lip-read, or letting them sit in a quiet corner of the office where background noise is not such an issue for them.

The message from the Government about Disability Confident employers is very strong and very useful, but now, with the capping of Access to Work support, they seem to be sending a contradictory message. Can we afford not to support people in work? What is the cost of not supporting them? What a loss of talent. As we have said, this debate covers many areas and not just one Department, but not least is the Department responsible for economic development, because what is the cost to our economy of not utilising and maximising the potential of all our citizens, including people who are deaf or hard of hearing?

What can we do? What concrete action can we take? The recommendations in the 2015 action plan were very welcome. I think there is agreement on both sides of the House that that is a sensible plan, so let us see it put into action. The “What Works” guidelines published this year were an excellent piece of work that we need to build on. Concrete action is needed at every stage. We need to ensure that newborn babies are properly screened and that the screening is always of high quality. We need to support parents of deaf children with early intervention. We need to support schools and ensure that there are specialist teachers and that children are not allowed to feel like second-class citizens. We need to promote British Sign Language in schools and allow it to become a GCSE subject. We should look to the Scottish example—an excellent job is obviously being done there. As someone who is half-Scottish, I say, “If the Scots can do it, so can we,” and I am sure we will do it at least as well.

We must ensure that equipment is enhanced and not restricted. I was shocked to hear of clinical commissioning groups that are beginning to restrict the provision of hearing aids. The criteria for cochlear implants must be reviewed. We must look to aid people’s hearing and support them to live full lives, rather than looking for ways to limit them. We have to go back and review those criteria.

Let us invest in unlocking the potential of the deaf and the hard of hearing. Our economy depends on the talents of all our people. The cost of not acting not only causes misery for individuals who are discriminated against and excluded from society and the world of work, but stores up for the future huge costs for our health, support services and, of course, our economy. The failure to support deaf people to fulfil their potential is costing the economy. We cannot afford not to act.

3.55 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine): I thank all hon. Members very much for their contributions. There are many ways I could spend a Thursday afternoon, but I have really enjoyed this.
debate and I have learned a lot. This has been a consensual debate, and I thank the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper), for the excellent tone of her comments. I really enjoyed what she had to say as well.

Like everyone else, I congratulate the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) on securing the debate through the Backbench Business Committee, and also our signers. Thank you for doing what is a first and for working so hard. I cannot sign, but I can imagine that it is quite hard work to do it for three hours. There are two signers and they have worked really hard. Thank you for that.

I do not have a hearing problem, but I do have a sight problem, which is why I have a lector in front of me. The papers are far too far away from me without it, which is why I always put it into play.

I thank the all-party parliamentary group on deafness, a number of whose members have spoken today, for all the work that it does in the House in raising awareness and improving the way we provide support. I cannot remember in my time in the House a debate on this subject, so it was certainly long overdue. All-party groups can do this; the Backbench Business Committee is excellent.

As we have heard, hearing loss is widespread, affecting one in six of the UK population, and it has a massive impact on the lives of our constituents and, indeed, some Members of the House. We have heard today really incredible contributions and—I agree with the hon. Member for Burnley—really moving contributions, especially from the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper). There was not a dry eye in the House when she was speaking—thank you for the way you put things. I was going to intervene to give her a chance to have a drink, but she was brilliant in the way she put things. I thank her for that.

I shall highlight the key steps that the Government are taking to support those with hearing loss and deafness and then move on to the other important points raised by hon. Members during the debate. I apologise in advance in case I do not cover them all; I will write to hon. Members about any points that are not covered.

As we heard from the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse, in March 2015 the Department of Health and NHS England published “Action Plan on Hearing Loss”. That is a statement of intent for action across the health and care sector. There is an ongoing programme of work that the action plan has initiated. There are 20 separate outcome measures, which the hon. Gentleman touched on.

In September 2017—working with the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Education and hearing loss charities—NHS England issued a series of “What Works” guides, providing examples of what we know works in supporting individuals with hearing loss throughout their lives. Those guides, aimed at organisations, providers and commissioners, cover hearing loss and employment, the transition to adulthood for young people with hearing loss, and hearing loss and healthy ageing.

A key point in the plan is the need for clear guidance for commissioners, and in July 2016 NHS England published “Commissioning Services for People with Hearing Loss: A framework for clinical commissioning groups”—snappy titles we do not do in the NHS, as I have learned since arriving there as a Minister. As the Minister responsible for public health, I am very pleased that framework recognises hearing loss as a “major public health challenge”, because that is exactly what it is. The framework is a major step forward in focusing local commissioners on tackling uncorrected hearing loss and on addressing the variation in access to and the quality of services across the country.

The framework has been developed with a range of stakeholders, including voluntary sector groups and professional representative groups, such as Action on Hearing Loss, which has been mentioned today, and the British Tinnitus Association—ditto—which are members of the Hearing Loss and Deafness Alliance. The guidance is crucial in ensuring consistency across CCG commissioning in England and supporting commissioners as they make decisions on what is effective and good value for their local populations. In turn, it will help to reduce inequalities in access to and outcomes from hearing services. I recognise the need for us to maintain momentum and to ensure that the action plan secures positive outcomes for those with hearing loss and deafness.

Let me turn to the points—all of them, I hope—that have been raised. In response to the speech by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), who I know had to run away—he is my former boss—I say this: not only am I not the Minister for Education, DWP, DCMS or others; I am not even the Minister within the Department of Health covering this area, but never let that stop a happy Minister.

I really enjoyed listening to the debate. The smartest way to respond will be to take the points that have been raised the most. The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse, in opening the debate; the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), who mentioned her constituent; my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead and pretty much all other speakers mentioned the Access to Work scheme. I recognise hon. Members’ concerns about the impact of changes to Access to Work. I understand that the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse will meet with the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work early in the new year to discuss in more detail Access to Work and concerns he has about it.

Members will realise that I am not that Minister, who is my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton), but I spoke to her at lunch time ahead of this debate and I was on the Front Bench with her this afternoon for the statement on the new Command Paper. We will speak after this debate to ensure that she is fully up to date with everything raised that comes within her portfolio.

I think it is worth putting it on record that resources for Access to Work were increased in real terms in the 2015 spending review. I appreciate that hon. Members have all spoken positively about Access to Work as a scheme, but resources within a publicly-funded health service are still finite and they need to be allocated to the growing numbers coming to the scheme—8% more people had Access to Work provision approved last year than the previous year, including 13% more deaf people. Last year, we spent £104 million on Access to Work grants, an increase from £97 million the year before. As has been said by a number of hon. Members, Access to Work is a demand-led scheme and therefore the number
and level of awards will reflect that. We intend for it to continue to meet demand, and with that the numbers continue to go up.

I do not accept that the maximum level of support is too low. The help an individual may receive from Access to Work depends on their individual needs and their personal circumstances—up to the current maximum of £42,100 per year rising to £43,100 from April 2018. That is 1.5 times the average salary, which is far more than most of my constituents, and those of every hon. Member here, earn.

Transitional arrangements are in place for existing recipients and those who made a claim before October 2015. The changes do not apply until April 2018, provided that needs remain the same. People will receive annual reviews of their progress and support in the transition to the award level. The Government continually monitor the application of the cap and consider whether any further flexibilities might be required. That is another point I discussed with my hon. Friend before the debate; she is acutely aware of the situation.

It is not often that a Minister is able to stand up in a Westminster Hall debate on the day that something new has been announced and touch on something new. This Command Paper “Improving Lives: The Future of Work, Health and Disability” sets out our response to last year’s Green Paper consultation. In this document—a weighty tome—that hon. Members and I will want to study—we set out how those users with the greatest needs, such as some British Sign Language users, will be offered new managed personal budgets, as well as workplace assessments involving their employers, to help to meet their needs within their award level. Deaf customers will also be supported by a dedicated team of special advisers.

The hon. Member for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd) had to get away, but he has returned. He is indeed a friend from the grand old days of the coalition, as he put it. I have noted his incredibly well-made point about SMEs. My right hon. Friend for Hemel Hempstead made the point that those employing disabled people get a lower churn and a number of hon. Members reflected that message in their comments. I think it is absolutely right. A company based in my constituency, called Microlink PC was mentioned in the Chamber during the statement. It works with large and small organisations—big banks in the City and small SMEs across the country—and the focus of its business is to use technology to help disabled people into work. That absolutely includes people with deafness and hearing loss. Many people across the charities sector also work to help that to happen.

I saw the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse during the statement earlier, standing on the back row, and I knew exactly what he was going to say, and he did not disappoint when he raised the issue of the cap. All I can say is that I wrote on my notes the comments of the Secretary of State—which I know the hon. Gentleman will have noted, too—and that I know the hon. Gentleman will bring the matter up with my hon. Friend the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work when he meets her. The Secretary of State said he would continue to review, continue to look at the evidence. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to press on that and to continue to look at the evidence, because he has that there in black and white from the Secretary of State.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned—as did the hon. Member for Eastbourne and the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist), who has also gone, and many other hon. Members—the legal recognition of British Sign Language and the case for a BSL GCSE. It is not entirely clear to me which Department would lead on legal recognition of British Sign Language, which is the problem that so many people have referred to today. I am sympathetic to the calls for strengthening the role of British Sign Language. We want to see as many people trained and providing support as possible. At this time, Her Majesty’s Government are not yet convinced that the way to achieve that is through legislation. The Department for Work and Pensions undertook an extensive market review, of which the final report was published in July, which demonstrated that communication requirements should be addressed on an individual basis and that there is no universal approach to addressing these needs.

We have protections of the legal rights of people who are deaf in the Equality Act 2010 and in the duties of the NHS—the mandate that I am responsible for giving to NHS England and publicly funded social care organisations—to conform to what we call the accessible information standard. I am happy to take that point away. It came across clearly from many hon. Members in this debate. All I will say is that the private Members’ ballot is a wonderful thing.

On the subject of the GCSE, any change to the school curriculum, particularly the establishment of new GCSEs, is a matter for the Department for Education and something that the all-party group will have to take up with I. I know from talking to the Department before the debate—I suspected that this would come up—that there are no plans at this time to introduce further GCSEs beyond those to which the Government have already committed, but something tells me that the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead, the hon. Member for Eastbourne and other hon. Members who have spoken today will, with their usual determination, follow this through with Ministers at the Department for Education, who will no doubt note the hon. Members’ comments today.

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse and the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) talked about the assessment criteria for cochlear implants. Those were debated in March when the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse had an Adjournment debate in which he highlighted the report of the Ear Foundation and he called for NICE to review its cochlear implants technology appraisal. As the hon. Gentleman will know, NICE is an independent and expert body that advises us at the Department, and it has discretion to review its guidance in the light of any new evidence.

NICE is working on a list review for this particular technology appraisal and will consult with stakeholders in 2018, so I will make sure that he and all other hon. Members who have raised this matter get early sight of that and do not have to go looking for it or hear about it in the media. I am absolutely sure that this will include consideration of thresholds and criteria for getting cochlear implants. I understand that NICE is planning this consultation because of its recognition of how important this is, going beyond the usual review process. Although that does not give the hon. Gentleman the clarity he wants, I hope it is helpful to him in some way.
The hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart)—who spoke excellently about this—talked about the provision of functionally equivalent telecoms services and video-text relay services. Obviously telecommunications does not sit within the Department of Health—no matter how big our remit, I do not think we have that one—but it is very good to hear that companies such as 3 and deafPLUS are at the forefront of delivering equivalent services for their hard-of-hearing customers. I wish deafPLUS all the best in the Helpline awards, which it has been nominated for. I understand that the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has previously considered the issue of provision of telecoms services, despite it being a commercial decision for the public-facing companies. This has included the Department engaging with companies and industry, and Ministers writing to the FTSE 100 companies seeking views. I hear that the feedback from that included the view that there were better means of meeting the needs of consumers with less reliance on video relay services. I am happy to raise the issues highlighted by Members with DCMS colleagues and see what further engagement there can be, and will of course recommend that they look at the Australia example that my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South spoke about in such glowing terms.

The Member leading the debate, the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse, raised the Deaflympics. I understand that the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), has instructed officials in her Department to look into how we can ensure greater recognition for the Deaflympics in this country, and she will consider their advice in due course. She is a very accessible Minister, and I know the hon. Gentleman knows her and will no doubt take that matter up with her as well.

A number of people, including the hon. Gentleman, my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) and the hon. Member for Bristol East talked about improving paediatric audiology services through the Improving Quality in Physiological Services—IQIPS—scheme. Concerns have indeed been raised in relation to accreditation of paediatric audiology services. The independent process of accreditation—the IQIPS services—is there to ensure all providers meet a common standard. We want all providers to have completed accreditation as quickly as possible. The commissioning framework encourages clinical commissioning groups to require providers to have completed the IQIPS self-assessment tool, and to have applied for and achieved accreditation, within the duration of their contract. Commissioners must be the ones who drive this forward. For us, the accreditation process is an effective means of testing against the standard. If during an assessment mandatory findings are raised that show nonconformity with any part of the standard, the service agrees appropriate improvement actions with the United Kingdom Accreditation Service team to rectify that and prevent it reoccurring.

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse and many others raised the issue, which I even question myself on, of which Government Department leads on British Sign Language. I completely appreciate the frustration with the fact that no single Department leads on British Sign Language. I suppose, although this will probably just make it worse, it would depend on the context; if it is in education, that would be for the Department for Education; if it was how BSL is used in health settings in line with the accessibility standard that I mentioned, that would be for my colleagues in the Department of Health. I get the hon. Gentleman’s point, and will take it away.

The hon. Member for Eastbourne, whom I know well and is welcome back to the House, talked about screening for hearing loss in adults. He made the point very well that we do not focus just on people with complete hearing loss. He said to me the other day that he feared the debate would be about the deaf-deaf, as he put it, and he wants to ensure that people with partial hearing loss get the support they need. He made the point very well that people begin to lose their hearing later in life, as age catches up with us all, but accept it as part of the natural ageing process. They are often reluctant to admit they have a hearing problem, do not seek support as promptly as they might with other conditions and, as we have heard and as he said, often wait years before going for a hearing test. We heard his call for the introduction of a hearing loss screening programme for people at the age of 66, once they reach retirement, and as part of the NHS health check for people aged 40 to 70. I am responsible for the health check programme.

The advice from the UK National Screening Committee, the expert group that advises Ministers on all aspects of screening, is that the evidence does not demonstrate that universal screening would provide any hearing-related improvement in quality of life in comparison to hearing loss identified through other channels. However, the hon. Gentleman makes a persuasive argument that we can do more to identify hearing loss as people reach older age. He said that the general election had intervened, but as he also said, he is back, and I do not doubt that I will be hearing from him again on this subject, probably at Health questions in a couple of weeks’ time. I will be more than happy to do so, to be honest. He also mentioned that CCGs commission the audiology services. NHS England’s commissioning framework captures the importance of audiology, and monthly waiting time data for audiology is collected and can and should be used by Members and the public to hold commissioners to account.

I touched on my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney, who spoke about support for children with hearing loss, and about his constituent’s son, Daniel. I was the vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on autism for many years when I was on the Back Benches, and we often used to hear about the so-called middle-class parents with sharp elbows who managed to get their children what they needed. That is, of course, human nature; but it should not be the sharp elbows of the middle classes or of anybody else that gets children what they need—that is what the state is for, in my opinion.

Children with a special educational need as a result of their deafness will benefit from the more integrated approach to meeting their needs. Since 2014, a new framework has required CCGs and local authorities to make joint arrangements for assessing the range of
eligible children's needs, and the development of what my hon. Friend rightly referred to as the education, health and care plans to provide necessary support. Every Member in this debate and in this House has casework on EHCPs. These arrangements are transforming the support available to children and young people by joining up services for zero to 25-year-olds—that is their scope—across education, health and social care and by focusing on positive outcomes. He is right to take up the casework, as I would myself. I think the performance of local authorities is vastly different across the country. I know from speaking to him outside this debate that he is working very closely with his local authority, as I would expect, and that he has been impressed by the improvements it has made. I do not doubt that that is because of the pressure that he has put on it.

In my hon. Friend’s speech he used the term, which I wrote down, “The right support right from the start”. I do not think that was an accident, because as a Member of Parliament I had an invitation today, as we all did, from the National Deaf Children’s Society, which he referred to, requesting the pleasure of my company at an event called: “Technology and deaf children: Getting the right support, right from the start”. Mr Speaker has very kindly allowed that to be in the state rooms in Speaker’s House at lunchtime on 10 January. I think that will be an excellent event, and I hope it is well attended; I suspect it will be by all Members in this room.

My hon. Friend touched on special educational needs funding as well. The implementation of the new SEN system has been supported by significant new investment. That includes £70 million in ‘14-15, £113 million in ‘14 through to ‘17 in the implementation funding, and £45 million in the same period for independent supporters for families. Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission are reviewing how all local authorities—authorities know about this—and their CCG partners work together to meet the needs of children with SEN as the EHCPs come into force. The assessment criteria are there, and are very much on their shoulders.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst) gave a brilliant and very personal speech, if I may say so. It is never easy to do that in this place. It gets lots of retweets, but that is the easy bit; it is really hard to do it. She mentioned her mum’s story, and I thought she spoke brilliantly. She used the term invisible disability, which the hon. Member for Burnley also used. My hon. Friend said that deafness could take many different forms and have impacts physical and mental. I thought she made the case really coherently.

To touch again on my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead, my former boss, for the record, I do not mind at all when former Ministers come to debate that I am responding to, especially when they are former Ministers for a Department that I am not responsible for. I thought he made the point very well about the scale of the issue and the hidden deafness in this country, and he gave his example of industrial causes of deafness.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) told us about the BSL Act in Scotland and the ensuing national action plan, which he directed colleagues to look at. I will direct colleagues in the UK Government to look at that. Hats off to him for his attempt at signing the start of his speech. I thought that was a very brave move, and I thank him for his remarks.

The hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Teresa Pearce) spoke very well about loneliness. I wonder whether the loneliness commission that our former colleague Jo Cox set up touched on the issue of deafness and its impact on loneliness. I would be interested to learn from those involved whether it did. The hon. Lady spoke about Jacob and the crowdfunding in her constituency for his cochlear implant. I do not know the details of his case, so it would be unfair for me to comment, but it sounds as though her community is showing incredible grace to that little boy. It would be wonderful to see him in the House when he has had his implant. She also raised the issue of the Access to Work cap again. My Department for Work and Pensions colleagues and I will write to her about her specific questions on numbers.

The hon. Member for West Lancashire spoke about her kidnap by the deaf community. Again, hers was a very emotional speech. I so wish she had done what she threatened to do and signed her entire speech, as long as she had given me a copy of it beforehand. I like to think I can cope, but I would not have coped with all of that. I thank her for her well made comments, especially about a single gateway. She is a member of the Health Committee, and I suspect that she is also a member of the all-party group, so perhaps she will make that suggestion to the new Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work and will talk about the cap on Access to Work when the group meets her. The hon. Lady also referred to invisible disability.

The hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) made points about the gender gap and EU law post-Brexit. They definitely do not fall within my remit, but I will write to him. We have the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, or the repeal Bill as it is colloquially known, and in the past week or so, we have had a taste of the issues relating to animal rights. I have to say, as a Government MP and a Government Minister, that somehow we need the EU to have good rights relating to looking after animals in our country, let alone our citizens. I do not buy that for a minute. We will import that regulation through the Bill and then look at it as a sovereign Parliament and decide how we can improve on it. I am sure there are ways to do that. From what Members have said on the subject in this debate, and given the other Members who are interested, I somehow do not think that the issue will go unheard.

I will leave a few minutes for the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse to sum up. In conclusion, we have had a very interesting, honest debate. I hope I have been able to demonstrate to hon. Members that across my now expanding portfolio, we have a strong framework for supporting people with hearing loss through a set of quality and commissioning criteria—within a restricted budget, of course; that will always be the case. Setting the expectations for commissioners and providers is what we in the Department of Health are most interested in. The dedicated action plan on hearing loss is being spearheaded by NHS England, for which I am responsible, and the multi-agency approach is enshrined in the action plan.
We are doing a lot, but we can always do more. Some really good points have been made in today’s debate. Whether more people are watching today’s debate than “Pointless”, I do not know, but if more people watched debates such as this, they would have a fair better opinion of Parliament than some of them do. We have had a really good debate and have covered a huge amount of ground. I very much thank hon. Members for their contributions, which have all been from the heart and incredibly well informed. I look forward to following up on many of the issues that have been raised.

4.23 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick: I am grateful for the opportunity to sum up. Ms Buck. Invariably, the Member who sums up such debates says, “We have had a good discussion.” Not only is that the case today, but this has been an exceptional debate, and I thank everybody who has contributed. There has been a personal theme, but even those who did not raise a personal experience clearly have a grasp of the importance of the subject to their constituents. If any hon. Members are not on the all-party group mailing list, they are now, but I suspect everybody already is.

The hon. Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) put his finger on the big issue. As others mentioned, this is a cross-departmental matter, so we need a champion. I will return to that in due course. My right hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) spoke about IQIPS and accreditation. It was powerful, as was the personal story told by my hon. Friend the Member for Blyth Valley (Liz Twist). My hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) told her stories about having BSL as her first language, and the Access to Work issues. She spoke about Liverpool minicoms, and her dad, of whom she is clearly and rightly very proud. I am sure that it touched everybody in the room.

The politics came from the three Front-Bench speakers; the place went back to normal when they started talking. I mean no disrespect at all; they deal with things from a political point of view. Judging by their speeches, the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day), my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper) and the Minister clearly understand the issues, and we are grateful for that.

Finally, we need a champion in Government. BSL needs a champion in Government. At some point, a Department or a Secretary of State will have to say to a Minister, “You’re the person for the job.” Then we can all go support that person and get a better hearing in Government. This has been a powerful debate. I am grateful to both signers for being here—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”]—and to the House authorities for facilitating that. I hope that this is the first of many opportunities and becomes the norm. I am grateful for the opportunity to say these few words in closing.

Ms Karen Buck (in the Chair): On behalf of us all, I thank the two signers, Sally Macreavy and Richard Law. We greatly appreciate their work.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered deafness and hearing loss.

4.28 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Helen Jones: My hon. Friend is right and, again, I will come to that matter later.

When we are told that only the private sector generates value in the economy, we should ask, “Yes, but who looks after your workers when they are sick? Who do you call if you are burgled or are the victim of fraud? Who do you call if a fire starts in your building? Who educated the workers you employ?” The answer is, of course, “the public sector”. There is something else about the public sector that cannot be measured so easily: it has contributed more to human improvement and happiness than it is possible to say. Without our teachers and our classroom assistants, for instance, so many hopes and aspirations would be stifled. Having a national health service has freed many families from the fear of being ill and not being able to pay the doctor. The improvements that NHS staff have made in preventing and tackling disease have vastly increased everyone’s quality of life.

Something else about the public sector is that its workers are often ready to go the extra mile, precisely because they believe in the notion of public service. We see that in teachers and classroom assistants, who put in extra classes in their own time to help children who are struggling or to help the very brightest achieve their potential. We see it in an NHS support worker, who will bring in a card or a small gift for an old person on their birthday because they know they have no one else. We see it in a police community support officer who will go around to reassure a victim of crime or antisocial behaviour, even when they are off duty. Nor should we forget that we saw it in this House when Westminster was under attack from terrorists. The staff of St Thomas’s Hospital ran—they ran—across that bridge, heedless of their own safety, to help others, and a very brave man, Police Constable Keith Palmer, lost his life defending us. After such incidents, a lot of gratitude is expressed to public sector workers, and rightly so, but gratitude does not pay the rent or the mortgage, or put food on the table. It does not buy a new uniform for the kids, or does not pay the rent or the mortgage, or put food on the table. It does not buy a new uniform for the kids, or put food on the table. It does not buy a new uniform for the kids, or put food on the table.

Gratitude for public sector workers is not enough; they also deserve our respect. Respect involves paying them a day out.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend. Aintree University Hospital is in my constituency. Nurses have had a 14% pay cut in real terms since 2010 and one in four of them is taking on additional employment to make ends meet. What does that say about the state of our economy?

Helen Jones: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Gratitude for public sector workers is not enough; they also deserve our respect. Respect involves paying them a decent wage for the job they do but, sadly, under this Government their wages have been continually held down.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Many of the arguments my hon. Friend made up to now would have been recognised and endorsed by traditional Conservatives. Is it not unfortunate that, having imported the anti-state ideology from the US Republicans, they now see the state and public service as the enemy rather than a key part of the mixed economy?

Helen Jones: I could not have put it better myself. The result was that one of the Conservative Government’s first actions was to announce a two-year freeze on

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the speech she has started to make. Does she agree that one of the great betrayals and causes of instability is the constant promise that the pay cap is temporary, when all the time it has continued, and seven years down the line here we are?

Helen Jones: I beg to move.

That this House has considered e-petition 200032 relating to public sector pay.

It is a great pleasure to be here under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson.

When Conservative Members talk about public sector workers, it is common to hear them refer to them as if they were somehow a drain on the economy. They try to make a distinction between public sector workers and taxpayers, as if somehow to be fair to one is unfair to the other. That is nonsense, for two reasons. First, public sector workers, like most of us—or at least those of us who cannot afford obscure offshore tax avoidance schemes—are taxpayers and, secondly, in a modern economy the private sector and the public sector are interdependent. It is not possible to run a 21st-century economy without a healthy, educated workforce. The security that is provided by our armed forces, the police and the fire service is as essential to businesses as to individuals, and the rule of law they maintain, along with the courts and the Prison Service, provides the essential stability that allows businesses to grow and invest.

The improvements that NHS staff have made in preventing and tackling disease have vastly increased everyone’s quality of life.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the way in which she is introducing the debate. As Chair of the Petitions Committee, she always introduces these debates with great force and eloquence. In addition to the points she has made, does she agree that public sector workers are also consumers?

It is essential that they are appropriately rewarded, as consumers, for their work so that they too can contribute to stimulating the economy, including the private sector.
public sector pay from 2011-12. They followed that up with an announcement that public sector pay would be capped at 1% for the following four years and, in his 2015 summer Budget, the Chancellor announced a further four years of the cap, saying that he would fund public sector workforces for a pay award of 1%. That did not mean, of course, that everyone would get even 1%: a letter from the right hon. Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands), then a Treasury Minister, made it clear that the money was first to be used—as if—to address recruitment and retention pressures in the system: “there should not be an expectation that every worker will receive a 1% award”. What that meant, of course, was that those people in areas where there were retention pressures received less, and those in areas where there were many people on the minimum wage—£6,000 in local government alone—who had rightly to receive a pay rise, received less. Even if a public sector worker got the 1% pay rise, their wages were still declining in real terms. A public sector worker on the median income who had their pay determined by the pay cap would, by 2016, have lost £3,875 in real terms. Real-term losses of between £2,000 and £3,000 are common throughout the public sector.

A midwife on band 6 will have seen a real-terms decline in her wages of 12.1%. Midwives are leaving the profession at a previously unseen rate. They are leaving the register in serious numbers. A teacher outside London who had their pay determined by the pay cap would, by 2016, have lost £3,875 in real terms. Real-term losses of between £2,000 and £3,000 are common throughout the public sector.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an incredible speech, and I thank her for giving way. On the point about rising prices and falling wages, I want to tell her about a police officer who contacted me. He said that after 20 years of service, he never thought he would be in a position where he was struggling to look after his family. He ended with a question: “Do we really want a police force that is stressed out and humiliated by not being able to look after their family?” The clear and simple answer to that is no, we do not.

Helen Jones: My hon. Friend is right. I will come to the effect on local economies in a moment. In the meantime, we should note that the costs of going to work have risen since 2010. Bus and coach fares have gone up by 25%. Many low-paid public sector workers are reliant on public transport because they cannot afford to run a car. The cost of a nursery place for a child under two has gone up by 21% on average. In big cities, it has gone up much more. For a child older than two, the cost has gone up by 19.6%.

In addition, public sector workers have seen other attacks on their wages. In many cases, their pension schemes have been changed. They are now having to pay more pension contributions than before. Those on lower pay have been hit by changes to tax credits and will be hit again by the universal credit system. Even when we take into account increases in the minimum wage and changes to the tax threshold, the changes to tax and benefits that the Government have introduced have hit poor working families even harder than those out of work. So much for having a system that makes work pay.

The real effect that those things have on people can be seen clearly in some of the evidence gathered by the trade unions. A Unison survey in 2015 showed that 73% of respondents had had to borrow from family and friends to get by. Some 17% had pawned items and 23% had had to move to a cheaper property or re-mortgage. Some had even used food banks. When those in the public sector—people we collectively employ—are having to use pawn shops and food banks to get by, it shames us all. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”]

Many other staff have real issues, too. In its document on the pay cap, the TUC interviewed a number of people about their experiences. A midwife on £23,000 said she could no longer have a night out or buy gifts for family and friends. An ambulance control worker who works part time—colleagues may have been in an ambulance control room; I can imagine few more stressful jobs—found that his family was £200 a month worse off because of changes to tax credits. A dental nurse had seen her national insurance contributions go up by £28 and her pension go up by £10. That does not seem a lot, but it is a hell of a lot of money for someone on a low wage to lose each month. It is the difference between getting by and not getting by.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a hugely important and informative speech, as she always does in her role as Chair of the Petitions Committee. On the trade unions point, the Royal College of Nursing has run a campaign in Wales asking the British Government, not the Welsh Government, to fund the public sector pay rise, because the Welsh Government have sustained £1.6 billion of cuts by the British Government to the block grant since 2010. Does she agree that it is not for the devolved Administrations to fund the pay rises? It is for the British Government to step up and increase the funding for our public sector workers to ensure they get the pay rise they deserve.

Helen Jones: My hon. Friend is right. This Government have been very good at trying to place the blame elsewhere for a policy they introduced. In fact, so bad have things got that last year the chief executive of NHS Providers told the Health Service Journal that one trust had...
tracked where its low-paid workers were going when they left. They were leaving to work in supermarkets because the pay was better.

Of course, it is not just pay that has caused problems for public sector workers. While their pay is being held down, they are being asked to do more with fewer resources, and they worry about that because they are committed to their jobs. The TUC report includes interviews with various people. One midwife said:

"The pressures on wards, the size of our caseloads and the level of pressure means we worry about making mistakes."

Another said:

"I've seen people walk away from the profession because they can't take it anymore. It all affects the continuity of care for the women in our care".

A firefighter told the TUC:

"My station used to have fifteen firefighters and two vehicles on each day. Now there are only six firefighters and one frontline vehicle."

That combination of pay restraint leading to real-terms cuts and increased pressure on public sector workers means that in many areas we are now having serious difficulty recruiting and retaining staff.

The school workforce census in 2015 showed that one in 10 teachers had left the profession in the previous year. We now know that one quarter of newly qualified teachers leave within three years. That is the highest since records began, and that is not surprising, because they are under enormous pressure. The Government have tried to deprofessionalise the job. They have taken away the checks and balances that used to ensure that heads did not behave unreasonably. Not all bosses are saints, even in the public sector. Cuts to schools are changing the balance of the workforce. We used to have that balance between young teachers coming in with new ideas and older, more experienced staff who could support them, but that is subtly shifting because schools cannot afford to employ the more experienced staff.

I know of one woman, fluent in two languages, who could not find employment when she wanted to come back into teaching after looking after her children. She can only find a job as a teaching assistant. That is a scandalous waste of her experience and qualifications. The Government got rid of lots of prison officers, and now our jails are at risk of serious violence, yet they are having difficulty recruiting and retaining staff. The NHS has shortages in various areas—accident and emergency, anaesthetics and psychiatry, for example—and the Government’s response when trusts bring in locums or agency staff is to blame the trusts for spending too much money. In fact, the cure is in the Government’s own hands: recruit staff, train them well and pay them properly. That means not only abandoning policies such as refusing to give trainee nurses a bursary, but stopping treating staff as the enemy, as the Health Secretary did in the case of the junior doctors, and it now seems that he plans to do that again to other staff.

In the Budget the Chancellor announced the Government would fund a pay rise for nurses. It applies to all the “Agenda for Change” staff, although we are used to the Government forgetting that cleaners, porters, lab technicians, support workers and a whole load of other staff work in hospitals, and without them our doctors and nurses could not do their jobs. However, the Health Secretary immediately announced that he wanted to change the conditions of work for staff, particularly their unsocial hours payments, so the Government are giving with one hand and taking away with another.

A very wise old headteacher once said to me—in the days when headteachers stayed around a long time, rather than getting burnt out and leaving—“People say the most important thing in school is that the children are happy, but I think the most important thing is that the staff are happy, because if the staff are happy the children will be happy and well taught.” That needs to be applied in other areas as well. Public sector pay has dropped 15% from its peak, and has lagged behind growth in the economy as a whole since 2016. It is now at its lowest level relative to the private sector since the 1990s, when, funnily enough, there was also a Conservative Government in power. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas) has said, that has had a huge effect on regional economies.

If we take average public sector pay and look at the number of full-time equivalent workers in a region, we can estimate the loss. The north-west has lost £3.7 billion from its economy; the midlands £3 billion; and London a whopping £9.1 billion. That is all money that would have been spent in local businesses, protecting local jobs. Most of the people we are talking about are low paid and the extra money they get is spent on essentials, but the Government choose to ignore that. They have several excuses, or explanations, depending on one’s point of view. First, they try to say that public sector workers have better terms and conditions than the private sector. Well, they no longer have better pensions—although most of them never did—as their pensions have been changed. Estimates of private sector pay are always depressed by the fact that some areas of the private sector have very low pay indeed. The Government know that, because their statistics authority told them so in 2016 and showed that on a like for like comparison public sector workers are on average paid 5.5% less than in the private sector, not more.

The second attempted explanation usually implies that public sector workers have cushy jobs and have it easy. Tell that to a police officer in the inner city, a nurse in A&E, someone who cleans in a hospital, or the bin men working out in the rain and snow this winter. Cushy? Most Conservative Members here would not last a week. In fact, I do not think many of us would last a week. The jobs are hard.

The third explanation says that all this is dreadfully, terribly regrettable, but necessary to get down the debt. We need to say that that is simply and absolutely wrong because during the time of the public sector pay cap, debt has increased, not diminished. It has increased by £496 billion. So if the answer to debt is a public sector pay cap, someone is asking the wrong question. The Government fail to take into account the tax that the public sector generates. It has been estimated that for every 1% increase in public sector pay, at least £710 million worth of tax receipts are generated, possibly as high as £800 million, cutting the amount that is spent on tax credits and benefits. That reduces the total cost of a 1% increase to around £600 million. Opposition Members will say, “That is a lot of money”, which it is, but it is a drop in the ocean compared with what the Government have spent on reductions in corporation tax.

The total of the reductions in the main rate of corporation tax, the small profits rate and the combined rate costs the country £16.5 billion a year on current prices. So there
we have it: tax cuts for big companies and pay restraint for public sector workers. Nothing could tell us more about the Government’s priorities. They also ignore the fact that public sector pay increases generate more jobs in the wider economy and at least £470 million in the wider economy, probably nearer £800 million, and that supports at least 10,000 full-time equivalent jobs in hospitality, transport and retail. The truth is that the policy is based on a failed economic model.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): My hon. Friend is typically making a powerful and eloquent case, which I agree with. Does she agree that another excuse the Government frequently use is that it is not down to them, but down to pay review bodies? The difficulty with pay review bodies, which are generally a good thing, is that they are not required to close the gap that already exists, but to consider relativities as they stand at the moment. Is it not time we had a proper review that looked at all the issues my hon. Friend has mentioned and that accepted that public sector workers are important to our economy, our safety and our everyday existence?

Helen Jones: My right hon. Friend is right. The cap has depressed the wider economy. It is now starting to depress wages in the private sector, and it is seriously depressing public sector workers. It has failed all round. The Government need to accept that they have failed and should stop trying to put the blame elsewhere. They announced, for instance, that the police can have a rise, but they will not fund police authorities to pay for it. Council workers can have a rise, but they are cutting the money available to local authorities. Health service workers can have a rise, but they will take it back from somewhere else. The Government must stop making excuses and recognise that the policy has failed.

Two things need to happen: first, all of our public sector workers should at least get a proper living wage: not the spurious national minimum wage, but a real living wage. We cannot run public services on the backs of poorly paid workers any longer. Secondly, the Government need to let proper negotiations begin in the various pay review bodies. My right hon. Friend is right: at the very least they should look at the discrepancies that have been created and how far public sector workers have fallen behind. Then they need to fund those pay rises. That would be good for public sector workers, the wider economy and our regions, and in the end it would be good for our country. It is time to abandon the policy and give people a decent wage.

Several hon. Members rose—

David Hanson (in the Chair): Order. Some 22 right hon. and hon. Members have indicated that they wish to speak in the debate. The debate appears to have a long time to run, as it can continue until 7.30 pm, but my successor in the Chair will have to call the Front-Bench spokespeople at around 7 pm. Given that we have two hours and, at the moment, about 22 hon. Members who wish to speak, I suggest that Members stick to five or six minutes. I may have to impose a time limit later on, but I hope that we can manage that voluntarily. I call Gerald Jones.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Hanson, for calling me to speak so early in today’s debate. Given the large number of people who wish to speak, I will try to keep my comments relatively brief. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) on setting out so powerfully how the Government are on the wrong track with regard to public sector pay. I also wish to declare an interest: two trade unions, Unison and the GMB, gave financial support to my constituency Labour party in the 2017 general election.

Right across the United Kingdom, we rely on our public servants each and every day to do the jobs that keep our communities and our country functioning—whether working for our local councils, maintaining our highways, cleansing our streets and villages, teaching in our schools, providing home care to the elderly, or working in our emergency services or Her Majesty’s armed forces. All those roles have one thing in common: they provide essential public services, and it is absolutely right that those public service workers need and deserve a fair pay rise.

The Government’s pay cap has been in place since 2010—seven long years. Throughout that time, our hard-working public servants have endured significant financial pressures. Inflation has risen by 22% over this period, while public sector pay has risen by just 4.4%. Wage freezes and the Government’s pay cap have lasted throughout this time, bringing financial misery to public service workers and their families, and causing huge damage to services. For example, an average public sector worker, paid the median public sector wage in 2010 and subject to the two-year pay freeze followed by the pay cap, has seen the value of their wage drop by £4,700.

The pay cap and years of below-inflation pay awards are also having a significant impact on recruitment and retention, and are one reason why nurses have been leaving their profession in droves. Local government is having trouble recruiting and retaining staff, with the workforce survey revealing that 71% of councils are reporting issues. That recruitment and retention crisis applies across the public sector.

Although the Government have made pay offers in excess of 1% for some sectors, the pay cap effectively remains in place for the vast majority of public sector workers. It is important that the Government do not cherry-pick pay rises for some public sector workers, which could be seen as an attempt to divide.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend aware that in my local authority area, Neath Port Talbot, public sector workers took a voluntary pay cut totalling £8 million to avoid the catastrophe of compulsory early redundancies? Does he agree that such a situation cannot and should not be repeated?

Gerald Jones: Yes, I do. It is an example of the dedication of our public sector workers but, as my hon. Friend says, is a bridge too far.

We need to see an end to the public sector pay cap, with a fully funded pay rise for all those working in our public services. Local authorities have tried to ease the situation. The two local authorities serving my constituency, Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council and Caerphilly...
County Borough Council, took decisions during the previous council term to become living-wage employers—the real living wage, not the pretend living wage that the Government are promoting. That has helped to mitigate, in a small way, the effects of the pay cap.

The Welsh Government have indicated their support for our public sector workers and repeatedly called on the UK Government to end the cap on public sector pay and give workers across the UK a much-needed pay rise, funded properly by the UK Government. They have stated:

“The UK Government must do the right thing and lift the pay cap right across the UK public sector as part of a wider strategy to end their damaging policy of austerity.”

With huge cuts to the Welsh Budget and local government in recent years, the Welsh Government have been unable to take further action without funding from the UK Government.

There are many economic arguments for paying our public service workers; however, as a country, surely it is our moral duty to value our public sector workers. They work to keep us safe, healthy, educated and cared for, in the face of prolonged real-terms pay cuts that have strangled their working and family lives. The Government need to act. Last month’s Budget provided the Chancellor with an opportunity to bring an end to the period of unfairness and pay misery for public sector workers. The Chancellor chose not to act. Instead, public service workers are facing Christmas and the new year wondering how they are going to make ends meet.

Finally, figures have been released today showing a rise in the number of children and older people in poverty of 700,000. That may not be wholly attributable to the pay cap; however, in-work poverty is on the rise, and the pay cap will have had a significant impact on that. Food banks are now used more by people in work than by those out of work. Taken with the resignations of the members of the Social Mobility Commission, there is plenty of evidence to urge the Government to act. I look forward to the Minister’s response, and urge the Government to listen and take action sooner rather than later.

5.5 pm

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I, too, thank my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for introducing the debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee.

Hundreds of people in North Tyneside signed the petition, and I have received emails from dozens of constituents asking me to be here today—some of them are former colleagues with whom I worked before becoming an MP. Thousands of people in North Tyneside work in the public sector. In fact, North Tyneside Council remains one of the largest employers in the borough, with over 3,000 employees. Many other constituents of mine are among the thousands of workers in Government Departments at Tynview Park, Cobalt business park and Benton Park View, which was known as “the Ministry” for many years. It is not surprising that there has been so much support for the petition locally, particularly given that many of those workers saw their pay frozen between 2010 and 2012, with only a 1% increase each year since then, meaning that basic pay for local government workers has, on average, fallen by 21% in real terms since 2010.

The Public and Commercial Services Union, of which I remain an associate member, represents over 180,000 members in the civil service and related agencies nationally. Its members have seen the value of their incomes plummet, with pay being cut on average by £3,000 under the pay cap. Because of pay restraint in all our communities we have seen huge reductions in disposable income in the local economy, to which many Members have referred. That is only made worse by large public sector job losses.

Furthermore, the pay cap has also led to problems with recruitment and retention in essential public sector jobs, putting more pressure on our already overstretched services. Perhaps that is why a recent poll by the TUC revealed that 70% of the public support scrapping the pay cap. It would make sense, as research from the Institute for Public Policy Research demonstrates that a significant portion of the cost of increasing public sector pay “would be returned to the Treasury almost immediately in the form of higher taxes and lower spending on means-tested benefits”, which, sadly, many of our public servants rely on. It would also bring more money into the economy and thus create further jobs.

I pay tribute to the public sector unions, mainly Unison and PCS, for pressing the Government on this issue, and calling for an end to the pay cap, with an above-inflation pay increase for all public sector workers. I hope that the Minister will heed the results of the recent ballot by PCS of all its members, in which 99% said the pay cap must be scrapped and 80% said they would be prepared to strike if the Government would not back down.

Some of the people who were bullied are my former colleagues, whom I described in my maiden speech in June 2010 as committed to delivering good services. I think every Member here knows that that is true. I went on to say:

“As Members of this House, we are elected public servants and we should do all that we can to protect our colleagues across the public sector from Government cuts.”—[Official Report, 30 June 2010; Vol. 512, c. 902.]

Seven years on, I stand by what I said then, and ask the Minister to show due respect and appreciation for all public sector workers. Pay up now and end the public sector pay cap across the board.

Several hon. Members rose—

David Hanson (in the Chair): Order. A number of Members have intervened, then left the Chamber. Mr Speaker takes it very seriously if people do not have the respect to stay for the rest of the debate if they have intervened. I hope that other Members who intervene will stay in the Chamber for the whole debate. It is extremely discourteous to all Members, particularly when we have 22 people wishing to speak.

5.9 pm

Eleanor Smith (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for bringing this subject to us.

I have received a number of emails from constituents highlighting the effect of the public sector pay cap on them. One of my constituents—a single mum of two, who is also a nurse working part-time shifts—has been
struggling to make ends meet, and Christmas is fast approaching. She needs extra money but is unable to do extra work due to childcare costs. The cost of living is increasing, but her wages do not reflect that.

I was a nurse for 40 years—I was elected to Parliament in the June election—and during that time, like many other nurses I experienced the pay cut. Many of us would say that we got three-week, not four-week, pay. When it came to the fourth week, many of us who could do extra work would do it, although we were overworked already. People with childcare responsibilities could not do that.

I am not only talking on behalf of the nurses; I am also talking on behalf of the support staff, who are on even lower pay. They would work 70 hours a week, which is not legal under the working time regulations, but what else could they do to keep a roof over their head? I was approached by a GP on Sunday, who asked me to talk about the fact that he cannot get practice nurses in his surgery because the wages are too low.

That is what happened to us throughout that time. I ask the Minister to look at this matter. I am a Unison member, and on its behalf I want to ask whether the Government will guarantee that the new deal on NHS pay, including the Agenda for Change, will get additional funding, and will not be paid for through cuts to annual leave and maternity pay. I can tell him this now: nurses and staff will not go for that.

5.12 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP):

Had the Chancellor's Budget a couple of weeks ago been different, we might not all be sitting here this evening: we might not even need to have this debate. Many public sector workers have seen their pay fall by up to £5,000 over the past seven years, and in the same period consumer price inflation has risen by 15%. That is not sustainable in anybody’s book. The Budget can only be seen as a missed opportunity to redress the balance.

Most people, not just in this Chamber but across the UK, understand that the 1% pay cap is not only unsustainable but deeply unjust. Surely the Minister will not attempt to justify it. How on earth could he? The UK Government’s current position, as I understand it, seems to be to cherry-pick certain public sector workers and set them against the others. That certainly looks like their plan, but how will setting workers against each other improve matters?

In Scotland, the Scottish Government are unequivocal in saying that the pay cap must go. It cannot be justified or sustained any longer. The rising inflation alongside too many years of pay restraint means that our public sector workers feel too hard pressed, despite delivering essential services, which we all use, to our communities daily.

I must declare an interest: until I was elected in 2015, I served in the public sector, as I am sure many hon. Members did. I was an English teacher for more than 20 years, and I too endured the pay cap and saw my wages fall in real terms, so I know what it is like. Scotland’s Budget in 2018-19 will be about £3.1 billion lower in real terms than the 2007-08 Budget due to the cuts by successive UK Governments.

The proper way to fund the lifting of the pay cap is for the UK Government to commit new money, which will bring a consequential to Scotland. That is the only realistic way to do it, as the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) pointed out. Like the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones), I am fed up that, while the Government mouth concerns about their so-called appreciation for public sector workers, they are quite willing to justify holding down their wages and seeing their living standards fall.

Unlike the UK Chancellor’s Budget, the Scottish Government’s Budget, which will be announced next week, will focus on trying to strike a balance between affordability and giving staff a fairer deal. The full details will be published next week. The Scottish Government face budgetary constraints, but let us do what the hon. Member for Ogmore said and put the ultimate fiscal responsibility for the situation we are all in where it belongs: squarely on the Chancellor’s shoulders.

I urge the Minister to be mindful of the real and understandable anger of the public sector workers who provide essential services. This petition reflects their anger about the fact that the UK is on course for the longest fall in living standards since records began, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, which described its forecasts of slumping productivity and wage stagnation as “pretty grim reading”. Household disposable incomes are set to fall until 2020.

The Chancellor’s Budget did not address any of those issues. As has been pointed out, it was a profound and cruel missed opportunity to show public services across the UK that they are valued and that they matter. Warm words do not pay the rent or put food on the table. The UK Government’s ideologically driven austerity is affecting every corner of the UK and every devolved Administration’s Budget.

The claim that there is no new money available to fund increases in public sector pay, which has been held down for too long—workers’ take-home pay is being hurt—has caused great anger. There are billions of pounds on the table for Brexit and the Democratic Unionist party, and there is apparently a blank cheque for Trident. There is money, but public sector workers are simply not a priority. That is disgraceful. I ask the Minister to reflect on that. The Government say they value public sector workers, but how does that value manifest itself? Whatever it means, it cannot mean continuing the cruel pay cap and continuing to alienate our hard-pressed public sector workers. I hope the Minister will go back to the Cabinet and his ministerial colleagues and convey the anger that public sector workers justifiably feel.

5.17 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for introducing this important debate.

Seven years after the wage freezes and pay caps for public sector workers began, there is still no end in sight for millions of workers, many of whom are low paid and struggling to make ends meet. When the pay restraints were first introduced, workers like me were understandably not best pleased, but many grudgingly accepted them. Not in their wildest dreams—or should I say nightmares?
—could they have foreseen that, seven years later, such conditions would still be forced upon them. The growth of the wealth of the very richest in our society has been matched by the growth of the number of people, including those in work, using food banks. It cannot be right that in the sixth richest country in the world, those who do some of the most important jobs in society feel themselves getting poorer every year.

Kayleigh, one of my constituents, wrote to me outlining her concerns. A newly qualified nurse, she loves her job and is passionate about delivering patient care, yet she finds herself questioning her decision to join the profession. She has spoken to colleagues who have been forced to seek a second job to feed their children. She has watched nurses leaving their jobs for low-skilled jobs in restaurants as the stress of being a nurse has become too much. She even spoke to one colleague who had to remortgage her home, as the rate of inflation had made it increasingly difficult to keep up to date with repayments. If young, passionate people like Kayleigh are considering leaving nursing, what does the future hold for our public services?

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): In my constituency, as a result of the pay cap, a social worker with Halton Borough Council has put off their professional registration to carry out the essential job of being a social worker, and so is left at their desk. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is disgraceful?

Preet Kaur Gill: Absolutely. I totally agree that workers are having to put their professions on the line in that way, as is Kayleigh, but it is not just the effect on such individuals and their families—the impact on the wider economy is clear.

Research by the TUC shows that the long-standing pay cap has meant that, since its introduction in 2010, staff such as nurses, teachers and civil servants have spent £48 billion less on the high street. Across the public sector, there are massive issues with recruitment and retention of staff. According to the Institute for Public Policy Research, in December 2016 there were an estimated 40,000 nursing vacancies in England, a vacancy rate of 11.1%, and 12,000 vacancies for healthcare support workers.

That is no surprise. Why would people want to go into a profession in which they feel undervalued and have a real-terms pay cut every year? If we cannot recruit the nurses, teachers and local government workers we need to provide the crucial local services that our constituents rely on, the very fabric of our society is at risk. It is time to end the stranglehold on public sector workers, for the good not just of hard-working people such as my constituent Kayleigh, but of our economy and our society as a whole. It is time to scrap the cap.

5.21 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Hanson, for calling me to speak in this important debate.

We have seen the cost of living soar by 22%, with the increase in the cost of utilities, food and travel exceeding that, so at the same time the pay gap is getting bigger and inflation is on the move. At the Budget, this Government were left exposed as not having an answer for all our public sector workers who have endured pension cuts, down-banding and cuts to their allowances. As union head of health, I represented people who had seen their wages decrease by a third. That is the reality of our public sector today, and it is having an impact on recruitment and retention, as we have heard.

In York, house prices are 9.5 times higher, and that is what people need to save for, although totally unaffordable. People are leaving our NHS, which has to go to agencies to put in safe staffing levels. That has pushed our health service into debt and into the process of capping expenditure. The Secretary of State for Health says that hospitals will have to find the money, but where from? We need the Government to wake up to the reality of what is happening to our public services—not just the NHS, but right across the public sector. Our public sector workers are so professional despite the pressure they are under, that they deserve a pay increase. Today we hear from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation that 13.9 million people have been pushed into poverty in the sixth richest nation on this planet—that is a complete disgrace.

I want to highlight one or two of the issues that have not yet been raised in the debate. First, I will talk about inequality in our pay system. We know that there is vertical segregation on the grounds of race and gender. In 2013, during the pay restraint, I was completely shocked that the armed forces had an advance on their pay of 1.5%—I do not begrudge them that, but everyone else received 1%. The police and prison officers, too, have had an advance in their pay that has not been awarded elsewhere. I highlight the fact that those are male-dominated professions, while nurses, teachers and those in other women-dominated professions, as well as those not even covered by pay review bodies and also predominantly women, have had no such increases. That shows an inherent problem of gender discrimination in the Government’s pay policy. I also emphasise that those who receive the lowest pay are the worst off.

With Agenda for Change, the pay scale that covers the vast majority of NHS staff, I want to highlight the disparity of pay. Although a fair system was introduced to address real problems in the pay system, since 2004 someone in band 1, on point 2 of the pay scale, has received an increase of £3,525, while someone on point 54 has received a £21,910 increase. That shows the growing disparity in pay. We need to ensure that we do not just add percentage increases to pay, which benefit people at the top of the scale. That is why the trade unions have come together this year to put forward a pay claim that addresses real problems in the pay system, since 2004 someone in band 1, on point 2 of the pay scale, has received an increase of £3,525, while someone on point 54 has received a £21,910 increase. That shows the growing disparity in pay. We need to ensure that we do not just add percentage increases to pay, which benefit people at the top of the scale. That is why the trade unions have come together this year to put forward a pay claim that involves a linear increase to ensure that those worst off in the pay system also get a fair deal. That is such an important issue. We also need to address the growing inequality between the different nations of England, Wales, Scotland and, in particular, Northern Ireland which now has real problems in the pay system as money is not being paid out.

We must also look at redressing the situation so that a percentage increase is seen as separate from the incremental scale—that is one of the points I really want to dispel the myth on. We have heard how pay progression is being mistaken for a pay increase. Agenda for Change is absolutely clear that incremental pay progression for all pay points within each pay band will be conditional on individuals demonstrating that they have the requisite knowledge, skills and competencies for their role. Forty-six per cent. of staff are at the top of the band, which is the
rate for the job, but people acquire skills and knowledge as they move to the top of the band, so that is not a pay increase—it is a mistake by the Government even to pretend that it is.

Finally, I want to say: do not mess with the terms and conditions. Those have already been played with so many times, and the kind of things that the Government have asked of staff—such as addressing unsocial hours payments—predominantly impact on women. Do not go there—staff do not want the Government to go there and will not let them take away those crucial elements of pay enhancement for people who work through the night so that they can pay for more expensive childcare. I want to say to the Government: “You have the money and the ability to raise that money—pay it!”

5.27 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Workers have suffered the longest stagnation of wages since a royal prince was about to get married—Prince George, the son of Queen Victoria—when Disraeli and Gladstone were in No. 10 Downing Street and trade unions were illegal, 150 years ago. The hardest hit have been public servants, with a 4.4% increase since 2010 against a background of a 22% cost-of-living increase.

Who are the public servants we are talking about? The Unison home help I met last year who was buying Easter eggs—“Is the council paying for them?” I asked, to be answered, “No, I am buying them myself and taking them around to all the people I care for, because some of them never see anyone else from one month to the next.” Tracey the neonatal intensive care nurse who nursed little Liam, who died seven times, back to life. The headteacher, teaching assistant and teacher in Kingstanding who were rescuing children from desperate poverty by turning around their prospects. They took one particular young boy from the bottom of the class to the top, despite the fact that he came from a household with no carpets, no curtains and no cupboards, with clothes stored in bin bags—acute poverty, but the school turned his life around. The police officers who chased the armed bank robber and recovered for Lucy her purse, which had been hijacked by him as he sped away from the police. None so noble as those who care, none so noble as those who save lives and nurse the sick back to health, none so noble as those who provide ladders of opportunity, particularly for the poorest in our society, and none so noble as those who put their life at risk to help save the lives of others.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Jack Dromey: Because of the pressure of time, I will not, so that more people can speak.

The reward of those public servants is rising demand, rising workload and falling living standards. That is the impact of not only pay restraint but major cuts to, for example, local government budgets, leading in turn to problems with increments, shift changes and fewer people being employed, so those left having to do more. In our constituencies we can all see the impact on them and their families, as they have to turn to debt advice, pawning household goods, taking out payday loans and food banks, such as the home carer I met in a food bank in my constituency—a proud woman with two kids who loved her job but could not make ends meet without going to the food bank.

If public servants are suffering, so too are public services, through the turnover of labour and the stress on staff—very often, staff complements are stretched to the maximum and those who work in public services are demoralised. There is an impact on local economies, because if public servants get a pay rise, they do not salt away their money into Cayman Islands bank accounts; they spend it in the local economy, creating wealth and jobs. There is a grotesque contrast between the way that public servants are treated and what has been revealed in the paradise papers. This is a Britain where we have a Conservative Government that stand back and allow tax dodgers to get away with it, and then the Prime Minister says during the general election campaign to a nurse that there is no such thing as a magic money tree. Yes, there is, and they grow on the Cayman Islands, Bermuda and Jersey, helping the wealthy to avoid their responsibility to society.

I am grieved because I am from a family of public servants: when my dad came off the roads he was a train driver on the London underground; my mum was a nurse; my Uncle Mick, who lived with us, was a street cleaner. They believed in public services, as the country believes now in public services and public servants, but public servants have been let down by a failing, uncaring Government. It is interesting that a monastic vow of silence has been taken by those opposite, who have been reluctant to get up and defend what their Government are doing. The unmistakable message from this debate is that they may stay quiet but we will not. Labour is on the side of public servants.

David Hanson (in the Chair): A number of hon. Members have withdrawn from speaking, giving us a little more flexibility. Rather than a strict five-minute limit, hon. Members may speak for six or seven minutes.

5.31 pm

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I wish to declare an interest; I used to be employed by Unison, which brought forward the petition and also donated to my general election campaign, together with Unite and GMB.

The Government’s austerity agenda has not only done great damage to our public sector services but brought our NHS to the brink of collapse. Indeed, in Hartlepool, our local hospital is at risk of haemorrhaging services, which is unacceptable to the people. I know from experience that relentless cuts and redundancies have led to remaining staff being over-stretched and under extreme pressure. For more years than I care to remember, those same workers have suffered pay restraint and pay caps. In the light of inflation, that has meant, in effect, that they have suffered a real-terms pay cut. It is a sad indictment of the situation created by this Government that health workers and other public sector workers in my constituency are resorting to food banks.

Things have got so bad that Unison gives out school uniform grants and other welfare provisions for those trapped in in-work poverty, and local branches increasingly
issue food bank vouchers to their members who are in need. It is unacceptable that this situation has arisen and that NHS and other public sector workers are struggling to get by on low pay. The pay cap has been cited as one of the reasons why nurses have been leaving the profession in droves, yet its main purpose—addressing Government debt—has failed. Since the cap was introduced, Government debt has grown by around 50%, to reach £1.7 trillion in May this year. Our hard-working NHS staff should not suffer the burden of ‘propping up’—

Mr Jim Cunningham: My hon. Friend has probably heard Ministers say how wonderful our public services are and that what staff and our emergency services do is wonderful. But does he agree that the best thing that the Government could do is to improve on the recommendations of the wages board for a big increase—not the one that the Government might be proposing? More importantly, does he agree that that the Government should put their money where their mouth is, and give those staff a decent increase?

Mike Hill: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. The Government’s words are hollow when they say that they will look at the pay review bodies but they have not committed to the recommendations of those pay bodies.

Our hard-working NHS staff should not suffer the burden of ‘propping up’ the Government’s failed and farcical fiscal policy. They deserve a pay rise and they deserve it now.

5.35 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I thank the 331 people in my constituency who signed the petition, and I commend the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) on very eloquently opening the debate. I am grateful to the hundreds of local people who have emailed and written to me before the debate and I am pleased to be speaking on their behalf in calling for action on public sector pay.

It is important that, as we take part in this debate, we remember the backdrop against which it is taking place. We have the worst wage growth in 210 years, and public sector workers have seen their spending power reduced because of rising inflation. The average household has lost £7.74 per week due to higher prices of essential shopping items such as bread, milk and cheese. The Governor of the Bank of England has warned that households have slashed spending as incomes continue to be squeezed by a weak pound, which is almost certainly because of rising inflation. The average household now spend one third of their income purely on housing costs. The recent Budget was a missed opportunity for the Chancellor to end pay restraint for our hard-working public sector workers. The Chancellor should have followed the commitment of the Scottish Government, which will lay out its draft Budget next month. Our finance secretary Derek Mackay has already said that the Scottish Government will lift the public sector pay cap, even if Westminster—

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): I agree with the hon. Gentleman that public sector workers across the UK deserve better than the current policy pursued by the UK Government. However, does he agree that in the interim, devolved Governments have a responsibility to do all that they can to mitigate the worst effects of the public sector pay cap, and to ensure that our public sector workers get a fair deal, regardless of where they are in the UK?

David Linden: I wholeheartedly agree with the hon. Gentleman. I very much welcome the engagement between the Scottish Government in Edinburgh and our trade unions on the public sector pay cap.

During the September recess, I undertook something that may be a bit unusual for an MP; called In Your Shoes, where I spent a day every week doing a different job: a day pulling pints and calling the bingo at the Tavern bar in Parkhead, a day with the Easterhouse citizens advice bureau, a day teaching children at Our Lady of Peace Primary School, and a day out with police officers in Baillieston. One of the last days that I did was at Easterhouse fire station. Over the course of the day, the guys at Easterhouse fire station were incredibly welcoming; they had me dressed up in all the outfits, going on the drills with them and using the ladders and hoses. After that, we went back to the fire station. I was grateful to the officers at Easterhouse fire station and the Fire Brigades Union representative, Thomas Hanlon, for their thoughts and comments on the challenges that they face. I was struck by the bravery of those guys, because when a building is on fire, they run towards it, as we saw happen at Grenfell tower. We MPs are on £76,000 a year, and the reality is that none of us would run into a burning building, but that is the reality of what those guys do. The Government will say that we are all in this together, but the reality is that we are not. We are not running into the burning buildings with those firefighters. The least that the Government can do is give them the pay rise that they deserve. Anything else is just lip service.

5.39 pm

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): I proudly declare my membership of Unite and I want to say well done to all the people who signed the petition to allow us to have this debate. I want the Minister to tell us two things. First, since pay rose by just 4.4% between 2010 and 2016 yet the cost of living rose by 22%, do the Government accept that they have in reality inflicted a real-terms pay cut on public sector workers? I say “real terms” because those are the only terms that matter to people outside the Westminster bubble. Secondly, can the Government really say that they value our public sector workers, who keep our services going day in, day out, when they first froze their pay and then capped it?
I ask those questions because it seems very difficult to get the Government even to acknowledge the problem. They are fond of saying that there have been pay increases, and we recently heard the Chancellor say that public sector workers are overpaid. Public sector workers across the board are unbelievably committed to their jobs—it is not all about pay. They are so committed to their work that they have worked £11 billion-worth of unpaid hours. Officially recognising them for the work that they have done would require a 24% increase in their pay.

Leaving aside the hundreds of unpaid hours of work, this is about a basic principle of work and pay. It is not right in principle that workers in North West Durham, for example, are worse off year on year despite doing absolutely nothing wrong. They are not directly responsible for inflation or prices; their living standards improve or degrade at the Government’s behest. If the Government are intent on keeping pay increases behind inflation, they ultimately have to accept that they are comfortable with making people poorer. I really wish that the Government would just admit that they are comfortable with that.

Fifteen unions, representing millions of workers, are asking for an end to the pay cap. Over the summer, thousands and thousands of workers took on the streets to protest about the pay freeze. I wonder whether any Government Members understand what forces workers out on to the streets or to withdraw their labour. That is always a last resort. It is a symbol of the hardship that these people are experiencing and of their anger—it is not about militancy.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): GS day is coming. My hon. Friend just touched on it. Public sector workers have had enough. Working men and women in all sectors, both public and private, have had enough. The race to the bottom has to stop. How much longer do the Government expect workers to wait? Workers should keep pushing: breaking point is coming. I urge all workers to join a trade union, get themselves a voice and become part of a movement—a movement for change and a voice for change. GS day is coming and I urge all general secretaries to get involved.

Laura Pidcock: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. Joining a trade union is the only way that workers will improve their terms and conditions under this Government.

The inequality between this place and the rest of the public services has been mentioned. How can it be right that Members awarded themselves a 10% pay rise in 2015 while most public sector workers’ pay was capped at 1%? People really feel that there is one rule for us in this place and another for all the rest. I genuinely do not think that Government Members can claim that they support or value our public services while they suppress workers’ wages. Pay is inextricably linked to morale, productivity and efficiency. Every single public sector worker I have met has said that they are under more pressure now than ever before, at the same time as their pay is at an all-time low. In fact, if we continue on this trajectory, there will have been the biggest average contraction in real-terms earnings since 1851. Are the Government proud of that happening on their watch?

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for her generosity in giving way. She makes an excellent point about productivity. It is correct that the UK has the lowest productivity of the G7 nations. That is not just to do with the private sector; a large part of it is to do with the public sector and the fact that we overwork, underpay and under-resource our public service workers. That has to stop if we are really going to grip the productivity issue in the UK.

Laura Pidcock: Absolutely. If our public sector workers worked to rule, this country would come to a standstill—it would collapse. It makes no sense at all to suppress these workers’ wages. As hon. Members have said, people who are skint do not spend in their local economy; they are very cautious with their spending.

Public sector workers need an above-inflation pay rise as part of a properly funded settlement. If it is not properly funded—public sector workers know this—the cuts will just continue through redundancies. If public sector workers do not get that pay rise, I will support them in whatever industrial action they take. If withdrawing their labour is all they can do to get this Government to see reason, they have my support.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for introducing this debate, and the 147,000 members of the public—especially the hundreds from my constituency of Bedford and Kempston—who signed the petition that brings us here. I hope that they know their efforts are making a difference.

I have long argued that public service workers are well overdue a pay rise. The Government’s response to the petition is not good enough. They say: “Public sector workers deserve to have fulfilling jobs that are fairly rewarded.”

They point us to 12 September, when they announced a move away from the 1% public sector pay policy towards a more flexible approach to pay. But those are just words. Where is the action?

The truth is that the Government are using the country’s debt—let us not forget that it has got worse on their watch—as an excuse not to give public sector workers the pay they should have. The Government were not worried about that debt when they managed to find £1 billion for the Democratic Unionist party or when they committed billions of pounds to funding Brexit. Public sector workers are bearing the brunt of the Government’s failed austerity policy, and that must stop.

The truth is that, far from respecting public sector workers, this Government are humiliating them. NHS staff were all but ignored in the Budget. Teachers and pupils were ignored. Firefighters were ignored. Police officers were ignored. Local authority workers were ignored. The decision on nurses’ pay was given to a pay review body. The Government refuse to take responsibility.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mohammad Yasin: Public sector workers should not pay the price for the Government’s incompetence. They are the backbone of society and will be supporting the public long after the Government are voted out.
Mrs Gillan: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Hon. Members: Give way!

Mohammad Yasin: If you had wanted to speak, you could have put your name forward.

Mrs Gillan: On a point of order, Mr Hanson. I need your advice. I was not able to put in to speak in this debate because I am not able to be here for the whole debate, but this matter was raised with me by two constituents and I came here to listen because I hoped that I would be educated. I have sat here and heard the Government being castigated. I wanted to intervene, and I was trying not to counteract your advice that we should not just intervene and leave the Chamber, but unfortunately the hon. Gentleman would not let me intervene. How do you think I can best make my point, other than through this point of order?

David Hanson (in the Chair): I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for what was, in many ways, a non-point of order. She will know that the hon. Gentleman who has the floor is entitled to decide whether to give way. He has chosen not to give way. I did say that Members should not intervene and then leave, because I was concerned that some Members intervened and then walked straight out. If she wishes to intervene and a Member wishes to accept her intervention, that is fine. In order to progress the matter—we do have some extra time now because of Members withdrawing—Mr Yasin can continue.

Mohammad Yasin: Thank you, Mr Hanson. I have not finished yet. I am grateful for the patience of the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) and I am glad that a Government Member wants to speak, so I will take this opportunity to give her a chance to do so.

Mrs Gillan: I am genuinely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I came here to learn more about this issue. Two constituents—one who earns £10,000 as a teaching assistant and another who earns £32,000 as an administrator—wrote to me because they had signed the petition. All Government Members value public sector workers; everyone sitting here is certainly here to learn. I wanted to ask the hon. Gentleman what his union’s proposals would cost and how it would advise the Government best to raise that money. It is a serious question, and I hope that he may be able to answer it.

Mohammad Yasin: You should ask your Minister how he will deal with these issues. If you care for the people, you should not ignore the workers, and you should not ignore the nurses—

David Hanson (in the Chair): Order. “You” is me.

Mohammad Yasin: I apologise. If the Government care for public sector workers, they should not ignore teachers and they should not ignore nurses. They should not ignore the 5.5 million workers in this country, and their families, who are struggling because of the cuts that the Government have made. It is painful that only a handful of Government Members have turned up for this important debate. That shows that they do not care about our workers, who provide such a wonderful service to our country. As my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) said, if those workers stopped work today, the country would collapse. The Government need to take care of these workers and listen to them, and they should stop cutting their livelihood.

5.50 pm

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): I proudly declare my membership of Unison and congratulate it on its work on this matter. Rather than asking whether they can afford to scrap the public sector pay cap, the Government should be asking whether they can afford not to. Recruitment and retention costs in the public sector are soaring. The local government workforce survey revealed that 71% of councils are having trouble recruiting and retaining staff, with pay in local government and schools cited as one of the main drivers.

According to data produced this year, almost a quarter of teachers who have qualified since 2011 have left the profession. As an ex-primary schoolteacher, in my experience that is due to teachers feeling undervalued and under-supported. They long to do the job, but everybody has their limit. The pay cap has been cited as one of the reasons why nurses have been leaving their profession in droves. Nearly 40% of full-time vacancies advertised on NHS jobs in March were within the nursing occupational group.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne) (Lab): I agree with everything my hon. Friend is saying. Does she share my concern that the issue is really urgent, considering the impact of Brexit? We know that some 10,000 EU nationals have left the NHS since last year. I therefore agree that continued pay restraint does not make sense in the light of the retention and recruitment challenges that the public services clearly face.

Laura Smith: I agree, and I will move on to another affected group. We have 900 careworkers leaving their job every day—every single day. An Age UK study estimated that, over five years, the NHS lost 2.4 million bed days as shortages of social care support meant that vulnerable patients could not be discharged, which has cost the NHS £669 million. For every extra pound put in a public sector worker’s pay packet, they are far more likely to spend it in our shops than to save it or stash it away in some offshore tax haven.

Unison research suggests that a 1% increase in public sector pay generates up to £820 million in increased income tax, national insurance and tax receipts, and it means reduced spending on benefits. It also adds £470 million to £880 million to the economy and creates between 10,000 and 18,000 jobs. A public sector worker paid the median public sector wage in 2010 and subject to the two-year pay freeze followed by the 1% pay cap ever since has seen the value of their wages drop by £4,781.

A Unison survey of its members in the NHS revealed that over 200 respondents had used a food bank in the last 12 months; 73% had had to ask family and friends for financial support; 20% used a debt advice service; 17% pawned possessions; 16% used a payday loan company;
and 23% moved to a less expensive home or had to mortgage their house. As a child, I watched as my mother had to pawn our possessions. No child should ever have to watch that. Our public sector workers were told we are all in this together and that a pay cap is necessary to deal with our country’s debts.

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend believe it is appalling that the Government are trying to play public sector workers off against one another and that every public sector worker deserves a pay rise, as they are the glue that holds this country together?

Laura Smith: Government Members may sit and roll their eyes and shake their heads, but as far as I am concerned they just do not like listening to the truth. I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend.

The Government told us that it would all be over by 2015, once they had cleared the deficit. That was pushed back to 2016 and then 2018, 2019 and, most recently, 2025. In the meantime, we have become the only OECD country to see wages fall while the economy grows. The cap means that public sector workers received a pay increase of just 4.1% between 2010 and 2016. In stark contrast, dividends to shareholders in the top companies rose by 57% over the same period.

Austerity is not working: it is only hurting ordinary working people while the super-rich get ever richer. The Paradise papers show us exactly where their extra money is going. We were all hoping that the Chancellor would see sense and change course in the Budget, but instead we got more of the same for our public sector workers. The Government are great at thanking our emergency services in the aftermath of a crisis, but when they reach into their pockets, they find nothing more than a pat on the back for the workers who hold those services together.

The Government must stop viewing a pay rise as a burden on the public purse. To do so is not only economically illiterate but an insult to those who work to keep us safe, healthy, educated and cared for. With every new spending pledge, politicians are asked, “How can we afford it?” Well, nurses are unable to afford food, police officers are unable to afford houses and cleaners are unable to afford to get into work—how can they afford it? Tax havens for the rich, executive pay ballooning, rapidly growing inequality—how can we afford it?

This is no longer a question of choice; it is a question of necessity. The Government must pay up now with above-inflation pay rises for all public sector workers. They cannot afford not to. I want to thank the public sector workers of my constituency for all that they do. I want to thank the public sector workers of my constituency for all that they do. I want to thank the public sector workers of my constituency for all that they do.

Laura Smith (Warrington North) (Lab): I feel privileged to be able to speak in a debate on pay and pay inequality, because it is surely one of the most important issues facing the United Kingdom today. I have had hundreds of emails from Unison members and hundreds of postcards from members of the Royal College of Nursing on this very issue. In summer 2016, the Prime Minister promised to fight against what she called the “burning injustices” in British society. This weekend, the four key members of the Prime Minister’s Social Mobility Commission resigned, citing little hope that the Government could deliver a more equal society. What more damning indication is there that the Government are failing?

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for so eloquently leading the debate.

As a GMB member, I feel privileged to be able to speak in a debate on pay and pay inequality, because it is surely one of the most important issues facing the United Kingdom today. I have had hundreds of emails from Unison members and hundreds of postcards from members of the Royal College of Nursing on this very issue. In summer 2016, the Prime Minister promised to fight against what she called the “burning injustices” in British society. This weekend, the four key members of the Prime Minister’s Social Mobility Commission resigned, citing little hope that the Government could deliver a more equal society. What more damning indication is there that the Government are failing?

It is clear that this country has a problem with wealth inequality. A recent report by the Resolution Foundation states that 1% of adults own 14% of the nation’s assets. At the other end of the scale, 15% of the British people own no assets at all. The reality now is that wealth inequality is hitting public sector workers—our social workers, police officers and firefighters—who are the very backbone of our society. That is largely down to the public sector pay cap: one of the most iniquitous policies the Government have come up with, and a policy not just of this Government but of the previous coalition Government with the Liberal Democrats—one might note that they are not in the Chamber.

In 2010, when the coalition Government was formed, the country was told it needed to make sacrifices to reduce the national debt. David Cameron’s exact words—I am sure we all remember them—were: “we’re all in this together”.

Seven long years later, debt is still rising. The date for the eradication of debt, as my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) said, has been pushed further and further back; and all our public sector is in crisis, because of the harsh austerity economics of those two Governments. All in all, the cost of living has risen by about 22%, while public sector pay has not just stagnated but fallen back, in real terms.

The Government have created a system in which the people we rely on most cannot afford to live in 21st-century Britain. To me, that does not scream of a society where we are all in it together; I am sure it does not to the other Members in the Chamber, either—or perhaps that is not true of all of them. Is it not entirely reasonable for public sector staff to ask what their sacrifice has been for? Is it not reasonable for nurses to ask why more and more of them are having to take second jobs, or use food banks, to feed their families? Is it not reasonable for firefighters to ask why 27% of their colleagues have contemplated suicide because of the stress of reduced budgets and increased pressures? Is it not reasonable for teachers to ask why teaching staff and their families across the south of England are ending up homeless because their wages have stagnated while rents have sky-rocketed?

I recently spoke to one of my constituents, who has worked in social care for more than 20 years. He explained the effect that what is essentially a seven-year wage cut has had on his life and his family’s lives. He could have put a down payment on a house, paid for his child to go to university, or saved up for a more comfortable retirement. Yet, despite it all, he told me how they would have
accepted a temporary pay cap, to protect the services that he has dedicated his life to. He is not unique; that is the norm for public sector workers, not just in Leeds North West but throughout the country, and I am proud of him and all public sector workers.

While such people have had to make money stretch further, the services they work in have been slashed and they are working twice as hard for less money to keep cash-strapped services from collapse. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has warned that the public sector faces a recruitment and retention crisis as a direct result of the pay cap. On any one day there are 90,000 vacancies for social care jobs in England. Just under 340,000 social care employees leave their job each year. Schools have been forced to increase money spent on advertising for teachers by 61%; that is money being wasted in the education system on recruitment rather than being spent on retaining excellent teachers.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Would it make sense for the Government to reverse the ludicrous tax cuts for the incredibly wealthy and corporations, amounting to some £19 billion, to fund public servants and end the pay cap?

Alex Sobel: That is an excellent point, and if the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) had stayed in her place she would have heard her question answered by my hon. Friend. It is right: corporation tax rates have fallen consistently, but large corporations have not paid their burden of taxation. If they did, it would be to the good of all society, including their own workers and shareholders.

The Metropolitan police have had to take the extreme measure of asking retired police officers to return to work to help them cope with demand. The argument is not only a moral one—although it is a moral one; clearly the pay cap is a false economy, and maintaining it is costing billions. It is not just the recruitment crisis that is costing the country billions; the TUC has also shown that the pay cap has meant public sector staff spending £48 billion less on the high street since it was introduced in 2010, undermining private sector as well as public sector jobs and pay. I have a simple question for Conservative Members—those who are left: who will you turn to when there is no one to put out the fire in your house, when no one keeps criminals off your streets, and there is no one to care for you when you are sick, old or unable to care for yourself? The hypocrisy of the Government is staggering. Praise is lavished upon public sector workers, but is not reflected in their pay packet. Praise does not pay the rent, feed a family, or heat a home.

It was widely reported on 12 September that the Government had lifted the public sector pay cap but, unfortunately, that was not the case. The pay freeze remains in place for the vast majority of public sector workers. The Government’s approach has been to cherry-pick some groups in the public sector for a so-called pay rise, which would still result in their wages being cut in real terms. It is important to note that the Government have so far failed to provide much of the additional funding that is needed even for such an incremental rise. In areas where funding has been discussed, such as in the NHS, there remains a lack of clarity. That is yet another example where the Government have been strong with words but weak on action; and we need action.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): On that point, does my hon. Friend share my concern that when he was asked about funding the lifting of the pay cap for NHS workers, the Health Secretary merely said he would look at reforming terms and conditions to pay for the increase?

Faisal Rashid: I totally agree; and nothing happened. The continuing pay freeze is putting immense pressure on public services. I have seen first-hand, in Warrington South and across the country, how seven years of neglect and under-investment have put unnecessary and unacceptable pressure on many public sector staff. I have also seen just how hard public sector staff have continued to work, in what are often extremely difficult circumstances.

The Joseph Rowntree report that came out this morning highlights the fact that poverty rates have begun to rise in the United Kingdom for the first time in two decades, and wage stagnation is at least partly responsible. That shows that even though we are living in a time of record employment, it is not leading to a reduction in poverty levels. That is certainly evidenced among public sector workers. Reports of nurses being forced to seek financial support and assistance, and of police officers struggling to make ends meet, have become almost commonplace. That is simply unacceptable.

Despite seven years of relative pay cuts, public sector workers have continued to prop up services and support communities with their professionalism, skill and determination. It is high time that we repaid them for that. They deserve to feel valued by society and by the Government. They deserve having the pay freeze lifted now.

6.4 pm

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this important debate. I thank my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for setting out the petition and opening the debate with some excellent points. I thank the almost 150,000 people who signed the petition, especially the 326 signatories from Warrington South. It is further evidence of public support for ending the public sector pay freeze, and it is extremely important that we, as a Parliament and as public representatives, react to that.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I declare an interest as a Unison member. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] Thank you.

I am glad to take part in the debate because of the huge number of people who have contacted me—constituents, many of whom are members of Unison, or are in the RCN, who feel strongly, and rightly, that they have been badly done by. It is high time that public sector workers had a decent pay rise. For too long—they have borne the brunt of austerity. Many of them have seen colleagues made redundant as the revenue support grant for councils, police, fire and rescue and other local services has been cut, and they...
have picked up the pieces—and, often, new responsibilities—to keep services going. At the same time, their wages have reduced in real terms, while their living costs, like ours, go up year by year.

It is no wonder there are recruitment and retention problems in the NHS and elsewhere in the public sector. In the NHS, demand has gone up, but staff continue to work to make sure patients are looked after. They respond magnificently in times of crisis; and we have had too many crises in the past year. That is not just first responders, nurses and doctors. It is all staff, from those who drive the ambulances to the porters, cleaners and technical staff who make sure our hospital buildings are safe, healthcare assistants and nurses, and the many other professions allied to healthcare such as radiographers, physios and lab technicians. I have been visiting a lot of hospitals recently, and I see how hard they all work, yet the Government want them to pay for their own pay rise by looking at their terms and conditions. That is outrageous. In local government, I see the staff who work hard keeping our streets clean, looking after those who need help and support, and keeping our vital services going. It is about time they had a decent pay rise, and that that pay rise was fully funded.

I will refer to one particular issue today, and ask the Minister to address it in his response. I take the opportunity to draw attention to a serious issue affecting NHS workers in Northern Ireland; I thank Unison for bringing it to my attention. While health staff in England, Scotland and Wales have received 1%—paltry as it is—in Northern Ireland they are still waiting for the 1% that the pay review body recommended back in April. It was revealed last week that £26 million has been found to fund the pay rise, but the Government say it cannot be allocated without ministerial approval, which is impossible, given the current deadlock in Northern Ireland. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has implemented rates bills and a budget, yet he says he cannot give NHS workers in Northern Ireland even the 1% they are already owed.

The Government should amend the Northern Ireland budget to give NHS workers that 1% and, may I say, more than that. I ask the Minister to make that commitment today. All our public sector workers in all sectors, right across the UK, deserve a real pay rise and one that is fully funded. It is high time that the folk who carry out our essential services were properly recognised and not taken for granted.

6.11 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for presenting the petition in this debate, and I declare that I am a member of the trade union Unison.

Before being elected to represent my constituency in Parliament, I worked for a local authority and, along with my colleagues, was subject to the pay cap. Since the election, I have been contacted by many of my constituents who work in our essential public services and are struggling to make ends meet. They provide the services that keep our society going. One of my constituents emailed me recently and said:

“I am a highly skilled professional, and yet my pay packet does not reflect this...The Westminster Government’s public sector pay policy has eroded my salary year on year and caused me considerable hardship, including having to move out of the family home for 4 years to make ends meet...Many of my colleagues have left the profession and low pay and other poor working conditions, including excessive workload, are deterring new entrants.”

It is a travesty that we are seeing poor pay and conditions result in people leaving the public sector jobs they love. Local government has huge statutory responsibilities and our local government workers are carrying out necessary, vital and admirable duties in ensuring that our communities are healthy, educated, housed, cared for in old age and living in a clean and safe environment. As the savage and ongoing cuts that local authorities have faced since 2010 have resulted in redundancies, those still working for local authorities are not only enduring unprecedented workloads but, to add insult to injury, are seeing their pay capped, which is in effect a massive pay cut for them.

As in all our public services, the fact that those workers and their families are struggling makes it clear that the Government are failing in their economic and moral arguments, and are oblivious to what makes society flourish. As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) pointed out, most public sector bodies are the biggest employers in their borough, town or city, and the knock-on effect of the pay cap affects the local businesses that serve the local workforce. As my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North referred to in her excellent speech, in the House of Commons Chamber we hear many platitudes from Government Members, praising the work of our public sector workers, but that pat on the back does not put food on the table, keep a family sheltered or give dignity to workers.

Patricia Gibson: The hon. Gentleman is correct that we often hear platitudes and warm words from the Government about how valued the public sector is; a number of people have alluded to that fact. Is he, like me, deeply bewildered and alarmed at the fact that today we hear not even platitudes—nothing but silence?

Bambos Charalambous: The hon. Lady is absolutely right; the silence is deafening.

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): With more and more children falling into poverty, many of them in working households, does my hon. Friend agree that the Government need to think now and address work inequality and income inequality, and that scrapping the public sector pay cap would be a great place to start?

Bambos Charalambous: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, and I agree 100% with what she has said: ending the pay cap would be a great start to addressing inequality.

Decent pay for a hard day’s work is an easy concept to grasp, but it does not fit with the Government’s view that austerity and stripping the state to the bone are the only way to ensure that privatisation happens hard and fast. Just over a week ago, the Chancellor had a big opportunity to ensure that public sector workers got the pay they richly deserved, but once again the Government showed their true colours and would only consider increasing pay for nurses, and nurses only, if it was...
linked to negotiation on their terms and conditions. It is shameful that the Government expect people to negotiate away their terms and conditions in order to get the pay rise they deserve.

The Government must put an end to the public sector pay cap with a fully funded real-terms pay rise for all those working in our public services. As my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) eloquently put it, we cannot afford not to lift the pay cap. Public sector pay increases generate tax revenues, reduce social security expenditure, inject extra value into the economy and create jobs. Unison research suggests that every 1% increase in public sector pay generates between £710 million and £820 million in increased income tax, national insurance and tax receipts, and means reduced spending on benefits and tax credits. It also adds between £470 million and £880 million to the economy and creates between 10,000 and 18,000 jobs. The Government need to scrap the cap, and do it now.

6.17 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): Thank you for the opportunity to speak this afternoon, Mr Stringer. I declare an interest as a former civil servant and a member of the Association of First Division Civil Servants, GMB and Unite, and I thank Unite for their generous support to my election campaign.

I start by paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones), who spoke very well about the issues, for her important and comprehensive speech, which clearly set out the need for a new approach to public sector pay. I was particularly struck by one of her points, which I believe sums up the issue: the Government must stop treating public sector workers as the enemy. Our public servants deserve our support, our appreciation and, most of all, a decent standard of living. That really is not too much to ask in the 21st century.

The pressure on incomes is clear. On average, public sector workers have seen the real value of their wages drop by nearly £5,000 since 2010 and, if the current policy of austerity continues, they face the loss of a further £1,400 by the end of this Parliament. Indeed, some workers have seen a pay cut of around 15%, a significant sum for those who are mainly on modest incomes.

I am aware of time, so I will move swiftly to the impact of public sector pay on my constituency of Reading East. As my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North said, there have been many harmful effects across the public sector; in Reading, that has been made worse by the high cost of living in the south-east of England.

Furthermore, because of high housing costs and other costs, which are similar to outer London, and the lack of any London weighting in towns like Reading or many other places in south-east England, public sector workers in my constituency have been hit particularly hard by this failed policy. Our schools, NHS, police, local government and many other services are being hit particularly hard by the pay cap. We have seen the loss of teachers and midwives, and shortages in many other key services.

One of the harshest and most damaging impacts of the policy is its effect on younger professionals. I should point out that, with starter homes local to Reading costing up to around £300,000 for a two-bedroom house, home ownership is quite simply slipping out of reach for many younger people in their mid-20s and early 30s. That is a travesty, and it will do untold damage to our services in the longer term. It is driving people out of towns such as Reading, and other nearby cities such as Oxford, and into much lower-cost areas, and it is fuelling deep problems in our services. It has not always been like this. Just 10 years ago, there were no such problems—or not to this extent—and a supply of key worker housing in the Thames valley area existed under previous Governments of both political colours.

Given the context of the housing problems in the south-east and similar regions, I believe that the pay cap is quite simply deeply unfair, and also unworkable, for both public servants and our country as a whole. The situation is getting worse, and I urge the Government to review the mistaken policy. The pay cap has lasted too long, gone too far and should not be allowed to continue. However, it continues at a time when the Government have money for certain things. They have £1 billion to pay off the Democratic Unionist party, £3 billion to prepare for a failed Brexit and huge sums to bail out the very wealthy, through failing to continue with the 50p tax rate and many other policies.

I urge the Government to rethink this policy. As someone once said, when the facts change, we should change our minds.

6.21 pm

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate. I had not intended to speak, but having listened to all the contributions from my colleagues, I felt it was worth making some remarks and perhaps focusing on some of the services in my constituency that have been most affected by public sector pay restraint. It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones), who opened the debate with facts and figures and opposed the ideological drive behind so much of what the Government have done in their seven years in office—not least holding down public sector pay.

I declare an interest as a proud member of Unite the union, and I am grateful for its support before the recent general election. I am especially privileged to speak in the debate as someone whose mother has served our national health service on the frontline for more than 40 years. That is something I am incredibly proud of. It is an honour to meet people who my family and relatives, who work in our public services, have spent their lives helping and supporting. That is some of the most valuable work done across our society.

I do not have great facts and figures, but I will mention a few services in my constituency. Merseyside police has lost 1,000 police officers and £100 million from its budget. The effects of that can be read in the pages of the Liverpool Echo, which show rising crime, criminals developing in confidence and ordinary people feeling insecure in their homes and on the streets. The Prime Minister had the audacity to claim that police budgets have been untouched and that police pay has increased, which led the Police Federation to say she has “lost touch with reality”.

I could not agree more. The Police Federation puts the pay cut at 16% for our police officers. There have been cases in my constituency and across Merseyside of some of the worst violent attacks on our frontline
police officers. To think that we cannot even afford these people a decent standard of living in 2017 is absolutely outrageous.

I recently visited Walton Prison, which is in my constituency. Under this Government, 7,000 prison officers have been cut—one in four—and the ensuing crisis in our prisons has led the Government to look to recruit 2,500 new prison officers across our prison network. This year, prison officers have been awarded a 1.7% pay rise. That is still a cut of £980 in real terms; they have faced such cuts every year since 2010. The evening before I visited Walton Prison, three new recruits had been violently attacked. One reason we cannot maintain safe standards and retain new staff in our prisons is because prison officers’ pay has been depleted and the worth and value of the job is not recognised by the Government. It is time for change.

Helen Jones: I know from staff at Risley Prison in my constituency that prison staff are now unable to take time off when necessary and that whole wings are locked up for half a day, meaning that prisoners cannot access education or work. Does my hon. Friend agree that, as well as that being unfair to the staff, it does not help us to reform prisoners—it makes it more likely that they will reoffend?

Dan Carden: Having seen that at first hand, I could not agree more. It is worth noting that the Prison Officers Association is lobbying Parliament tomorrow; I hope many colleagues can get along to that.

I must touch on Aintree Hospital, which is also in my constituency. Nurses there have faced a 14% pay cut since 2010, and one in four are taking jobs outside their employment as nurses to make ends meet and to pay the bills. The effect of the pay cap on our hospitals is to cost us more, as hospitals are having to recruit nurses through agencies at a much higher rate than if they were recruited through the hospital itself. The economics of this fall apart as soon as we put them under any scrutiny.

Some 70% of the public—or more, I believe—support the calling of the debate, and the reasons for that are clear. We have seen the worst squeeze in living standards for generations, the worst wage growth since the steam engine was created and the worst decade for productivity since the Napoleonic war. The damning statistics on wages and productivity point us towards the truth: we cannot cut our way to productivity and we cannot reduce wages and productivity point us towards the truth: we cannot cut our way to productivity and we cannot reduce

The hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) mentioned the impact in Wales and the devolved Administrations, which I agree with. The hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon), who is vice-chair of the PCS parliamentary group, mentioned quite rightly the PCS ballot and the complete dissatisfaction of civil servants in the UK. I hope to mention that too in my contribution. The hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Eleanor Smith), who is a former president of the trade union that I am a proud member of, mentioned the impact of the public sector pay cap on the economy, which I want to come to later, and the fact that all nations and regions of the United Kingdom are affected. She also rightly mentioned the physically taxing nature and environment of public sector work. She referred to binnies, and it may be of interest to her that I found, when doing my research, that refuse collectors have suffered a real-terms pay cut of £2,064 a year, which I believe is a disgrace.

The hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) mentioned the impact in Wales and the devolved Administrations, which I agree with. The hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon), who is vice-chair of the PCS parliamentary group, mentioned quite rightly the PCS ballot and the complete dissatisfaction of civil servants in the UK. I hope to mention that too in my contribution. The hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Eleanor Smith), who is a former president of the trade union that I am a proud member of, mentioned the impact of the public sector pay cap on nursing. My hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), in a typical tour de force, talked about the impact on the teaching profession. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) mentioned the impact on nursing.
The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) said that this will increase the gender pay gap. I agree with that point and hope to mention it. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) gave another tour de force, with very powerful examples of public sector workers dipping into their own pockets to help users of public services. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) talked about the impact on firefighters. The hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) quite rightly questioned whether the Government are comfortable with making people poorer. The hon. Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) talked about the magic money tree, which I will come to. The hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith), a Unison comrade, questioned the idea that the country cannot afford a pay rise. Again, I agree with that and will come to it.

The hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) said that workers’ debt levels are on the rise, which is certainly the case. The hon. Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid) talked about the pressure on services. The hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist), another Unison colleague who has replaced my good friend Dave Anderson, talked about recruitment and retention. That theme was picked up by the hon. Members for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) and for Reading East (Matt Rodda). Last, the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) reminded us quite rightly that all of us have family and relatives who work in the public services.

That was in contrast to the lack of voices from the Government Benches, with one notable exception. I think we are all disappointed by that. They are obviously attending to affairs of state and constituency duties. We did not even hear the moderate voices of Conservatives from Scotland—a collection of individuals who have yet to realise that their hero, Alf Garnett, is in actual fact a parody.

Luke Graham: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Chris Stephens: I am more than happy to give way to Conservatives in a moment, but I want to develop this point. Cynics may believe that a political party that introduced in 1823 the Master and Servant Acts—legislation designed to repress working people and punish them for joining trade unions—would not be interested in issues affecting public sector workers, but I cannot believe that that would be the case.

Luke Graham: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He will appreciate that it was also Conservatives who introduced some of the first health insurance schemes and comprehensive education schemes in the last century. My specific point is that the pay cap was not an ideological point by the Conservative party; it was due to financial constraint at the time. As he knows, the pay cap was devolved in Scotland for a great number of years, so the criticism that he is levelling against the Westminster Government today should also be applied to the Administration in Edinburgh, who have held that pay cap, even though they have the power and the money to change it.

Chris Stephens: If the hon. Gentleman does not believe that the public sector pay cap was ideological, I really do fear for him and for his political analysis. Of course it was designed to be ideological. It was part of the cuts programme in the Budget. They kept boasting about the number—

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Chris Stephens: In a second; I will just finish answering that point before we have a jack-in-the-box routine. It is good we have finally woken Conservative Members up.

Of course it was ideological—the Government kept talking about the savings it would bring to the Exchequer by imposing a public sector pay cap. I will talk about the effects on the devolved Administrations later on, but it might be very well for Conservative Members to read the petition itself. It says that the UK Government should be providing additional funding to fund the ending of the public sector pay cap and not allow local authorities and devolved Administrations to have to pick up the tab.

Alex Chalk: It is well known that Scotland now has tax-raising powers. If the Scottish Government want to pay their public sector workers more, why do they not just go on and do it?

Chris Stephens: Well, I would have thought a Conservative would know that the Scottish Budget follows the UK Budget. On 14 December, the Scottish Government—

[Interruption.] The hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) can shout people down and follow the lead of the Scottish Conservatives that we have seen in the last six months, but he obviously has not read the petition. We are debating a petition that says additional funding should be made available by the UK Government for this. As I said, a local authority, a health board or a devolved Administration should not be clearing up the mess of this Government, who continue to impose poor wages on public sector workers.

Patricia Gibson: Does my hon. Friend, like me, despair at the fact that there has been a £3.1 billion cut to Scotland’s budget since 2010? It is appalling that people representing Scotland in the Chamber today are attempting to ignore that.

Chris Stephens: My hon. Friend is right. The facts speak for themselves.

I am reminded of the speech I made in the Chamber less than two weeks ago on the Budget, in which I said:

“The only difference between this Chancellor and the previous one is that of style, not substance. Where George Osborne could best be described as a tin of gloss, superficially painting over the cracks in our broken economy, the current Chancellor is the tin of matt, hoping to hide the worst lumps and bumps with repeated applications of more of the same. Either way, they are both the same shade of Tory austerity blue”.—[Official Report, 23 November 2017; Vol. 631, c. 1255.]

As a former treasurer of Glasgow city Unison, I know all too well that trade unions have a welfare fund, which is an important aspect of membership and the recruiting of public sector workers. That branch’s accounts show that from 2010 to 2015, there was a year-on-year increase in spending of that welfare fund. Is that because the pay did not quite match the increases in food, housing and fuel costs? Of course it is.
Today, the average household has lost £7.74 per week due to higher prices for goods, including bread, milk and cheese. The Trussell Trust statistics tell us that in 2010, it delivered 61,400 emergency food parcels to hungry people. Today’s figure, which the Trussell Trust released last month, is 1,182,594 food parcels. All the evidence suggests that many of those going to food banks are, in actual fact, public sector workers.

Despite all the hints, the Budget failed to lift the public sector pay cap. With inflation at a five-year high of 3%, the value of public sector wages has collapsed. In 2017, the civil service people survey, referred to by the hon. Member for North Tyneside, has shown that satisfaction with pay and conditions has fallen and now stands at 30%.

The Government’s solution is to park the issue with pay review bodies. The problem with that approach is that 55% of public sector workers in the UK are not covered by a pay review body. They include jobcentre workers, who administer our social security and pensions system; those who staff our borders, working in immigration and asylum services; civilians in the Ministry of Defence, providing equipment and support to our armed services; and, of course, workers in the national health service and local government.

In November 2015, I secured an Adjournment debate to demonstrate the low pay in the Department for Work and Pensions. Over 40% of its employees were receiving tax credits. As a result of that debate, the Government had no option but to negotiate with the PCS a wage rise for staff in that Department.

Of course, there is the Treasury pay remit, which covers about 400,000 workers. This is the so-called delegated pay system—a notional arrangement whereby Departments and agencies are individual employers responsible for negotiating pay and conditions. Although the remit is “guidance” for civil service departmental employers and other bargaining units, it does set a pay cap framework.

That was not always the case. In fact, national pay bargaining was first introduced in the civil service in 1919, and that position held for more than 70 years until the then Conservative Government, over a period between 1994 and 1996, broke it up and delegated responsibility to individual departmental employers. The reality is not only that it is incredibly wasteful and time consuming to hold hundreds of sets of negotiations about an issue decided and controlled centrally, but that that has led to inequalities whereby staff at similar grades across Departments, and even across agencies within the same sponsor Department, are paid vastly different salaries.

A real danger of the Government’s current approach is that it will increase the gender pay gap, because it is clear that so far the Government have announced the ending of the pay cap for those services that are male dominated, and those Departments that are female dominated do not yet see evidence that the public sector pay cap will be lifted. That is a very dangerous route for the Government to go down.


Chris Stephens: I am not your friend, but I will give way.

Luke Graham: I thought we got on so well! I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way to me a second time. I supported the pay cap review, both in London and in Edinburgh, as did many Government Members, and my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury has announced the lifting of the pay cap to allow flexibility. My question to the hon. Gentleman—perhaps he is coming to this—is: what should the percentage actually be, and can he give us a trailer of what will be announced in the forthcoming Budget at Holyrood?

Chris Stephens: The last point is well above my pay grade, but I will say this to the hon. Gentleman. It is not for me to determine what the percentage is. That should be negotiated. But the Government should not impose a cap of 1% and then say to individuals, “It’s either that or hit the cobblestones and take industrial action,” particularly given that they passed anti-trade union legislation—the Trade Union Act 2016—making industrial action even more difficult on a national scale.

There is a clear and sustained argument about the clear economic benefits of lifting the public sector pay cap. There would be a positive stimulus in the economy through increased household consumer spending. That would be likely to increase GDP and tax receipts, reducing the overall cost to Government still further. Estimates show that the effect of increased public sector pay would be similar to that of a decrease in income tax. The findings by the TUC and the Institute for Public Policy Research show that the significant portion of funding required to lift the public sector pay cap would in fact be returned to the Treasury almost immediately in the form of higher tax receipts and lower welfare payments. The initial cost per year in 2019-20 of uprating public sector pay in line with the consumer prices index for two years would be £5.8 billion compared with the cost had the cap remained in place. However, that drops to £3.55 billion once higher receipts from income tax and national insurance and lower welfare payments for means-tested benefits are taken into account.

It will be left to the devolved Administrations to take a different path. The Scottish Government have said that they will remove the 1% pay cap. This petition calls for the UK Government to fully fund a pay rise. I say again that it should not be left to a Department, a devolved Administration, a local authority or a health board to find the money from its own resources. Should the Government not look positively on this petition, I can guarantee the Minister that Scottish National party MPs will put pressure on the Government to ensure that they do that, and we will continue to campaign for public sector workers, not just in Scotland but across these islands.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your stewardship, Mr Stringer. Let me welcome Mr Dave Prentis, general secretary of Unison, who is sitting at the back of the room. His blood must be boiling at the complete lack of interest from the Conservative party in this debate. As a trade unionist for many years and someone who worked in the public sector, either in local government or in the NHS, I say that my heart goes out to those people who cannot afford to live despite the amount of work that they put in and their absolute commitment to public services.
I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for achieving this debate, because we have been able to get a good feel for the situation and how our public sector workers are suffering out there. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) mentioned that the Police Federation had said that the Prime Minister was completely out of touch. That goes to the heart of one of the points that I want to make, but first I thank the 150,000 people who signed the petition—who took the time to put their name down. I thank them very much for that, and the trade unions that were backing the petition.

The Prime Minister is indeed out of touch with reality. The Police Federation was spot on about that. I will now ask people to use their imagination; I know it is a big ask for people to use their imagination in relation to the way the Prime Minister operates, but let me try to take them through it. Let us imagine that she is sitting there, with a smile on her face, reading the latest position paper from the Secretary of State for Health. All is well. The public services are well funded and the NHS is in rude health. The staff are all paid well; in fact, some of them are paid too much. There are no waiting lists for operations to speak of, or queues to see a GP. It gets better, in the Prime Minister’s mind. The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy reports that virtually everyone is in a secure, well-paid job, that the need for a national living wage is, for all intents and purposes, a thing of the past and that investment in our infrastructure is at historic highs. Of course the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, in the mind of the Prime Minister, reports that virtually the final brick for the 400,000 house to be built this year has just been laid.

Sustainable-trend economic growth is well above the OECD average, and productivity levels are going through the roof, as is wage growth. It seems improbable that things could get any better, in the Prime Minister’s mind, and then lo and behold, the Brexit Secretary pops his head around the door and tells her that the EU has agreed to all his demands, including tariff-free access to European markets, unbridled access to the single market and unprecedented immigration controls on EU citizens coming to the UK. He says, with only a scintilla of triumphalism, that the £70 billion divorce settlement cheque will be with the Treasury pretty soon, and the EU will pay the exchange control commission as well. Then he tells her that he is off to the Strangers Bar to have a drink with the Foreign Secretary and the Trade Secretary and she is welcome to join him.

This fantasy goes on. She apologises. She says she cannot go because she is waiting for a phone call from Donald Trump in which she plans to tell him in no uncertain terms that she is cancelling the state visit. She cannot go because she is waiting for a phone call from her Secretary and she is welcome to join him.

Over the past couple of hours of debate, many hon. Members have rightly paid tribute to the tireless work of our public sector workers, who go above and beyond the call of duty. However, these public sector workers, as has been suggested, do not need tribute from the Government; they need action. That is exactly what the Chancellor refused to do two weeks ago—absolutely no action whatsoever. I believe it is the Chancellor’s birthday today. He will not be getting many happy returns from public sector workers.

Some 5.4 million people work in the public sector, including friends and family members of mine, and of hon. Members across the Chamber, as has been alluded to. I would like to remind the Government what public servants do, because they seem to have forgotten. Public sector workers provide services that are crucial to the good running and order of the country. That has been touched upon. The armed services and the police protect our country and this House every day. My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North alluded to that as well. They provide services that educate and look after our children, and care for our disabled citizens and our senior citizens. That was alluded to by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey), who said that there is no one as noble as he or she who cares—I think that is more or less the phrase. I have said this before, but it is worth repeating: we rarely hear from and do not see many of the services until something goes terribly wrong, such as traffic accidents, floods, public health emergencies and so much more.

This debate comes as we approach the Christmas holidays, which is a tough time for public sector workers. It is a difficult time for our police officers. Many will brave the elements to ensure we are safe over the holidays. What about them? It is difficult for our dedicated NHS staff, who will work long hours, back-to-back shifts over Christmas into the new year. They do not want our thanks. That is dead easy. They want our support for a pay rise, which they have not had for years. It will be a difficult time for all public sector workers, who now face the lowest pay in comparison to the private sector for 20 years.

Despite claims to the contrary, the public sector pay cap is alive and well. It will continue to be so while the Treasury refuses to offer any new money for public sector pay rises and expects overstretched Departments facing further cuts to find the funding themselves. The Chancellor did not even bother to mention the public sector pay cap in his speech. Instead, he signalled yet another attempt to divide one group of workers against the other by restructuring the NHS. Time after time, he sets workers against one another. Under these plans, the Secretary of State for Health will attempt to manipulate recruitment and retention payments, to deny most NHS workers a decent pay rise, and refuse to lift the cap. It is the classic case of dividing the public sector from the private: the nurse against the manager, the admin worker against the manual worker, the north against the south, or the British worker against the foreign worker. The Tories use the same old method time after time. The Chancellor, the Secretary of State for Health and the other departmental Ministers should think again, because they are defending the indefensible. It is as simple as that.

The pay cap disproportionately affects women, who account for two-thirds of the public sector workforce and are already disproportionately affected by austerity. I ask the Government to think about that. Public sector workers will continue to lose out. As has been indicated...
today, research conducted by the TUC shows that if the Government keep the cap in place until 2020, midwives, teachers and social workers will all see real losses of over £3,000 a year.

Mike Amesbury: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is a scandal that one of the few growth industries in constituencies such as mine—Weaver Vale—is food banks? There has been a 30% increase in the use of food banks, and many users are public sector workers and women with young families.

Peter Dowd: My hon. Friend is spot on. Yesterday I was at Tesco in Litherland collecting for food banks. I would like to thank every single one of those people—we have all been there—who gave a tin of soup, a tin of beans, some fruit, some cornflakes, washing liquid, all sorts of things for those people. Thanks to those people for the 1.1 million food parcels going through.

Alex Chalk: My constituents at GCHQ believe in their national security mission and are immensely dedicated and skilful public servants, but those skills are much sought after in the private sector too. As the Government move away from the 1% national pay cap, does the hon. Gentleman agree that the need to address pressures on recruitment and retention in this vital national security sector should be borne in mind when future improved pay rates are set?

Peter Dowd: Any public sector worker, whether somebody in the military, a nurse, a refuse worker, a teacher or social worker, the five-odd million of them all deserve the pay rise. If the hon. Member’s constituents in GCHQ need a pay rise, I will support them—will he? I am not sure he will.

Meanwhile, nurses, firefighters and border guards will face losing more than £2,500. The cap is not working. There is a situation where households will have one partner working in the public sector and somebody else in the private sector. It is typical: divide the public sector from the private sector. Homes do not work like that. As I said, if one person is working in the public and another in the private sector, should one subsidise the other? Should the wife subsidise the husband? Should the brother subsidise the sister? No. It is absolutely iniquitous and it should stop now. The Government’s continued support of the cap is economically nonsensical. The party of economic confidence, of business—the nonsensical party as far as I am concerned.

Chris Stephens: Now that the Conservatives have found their voice in this debate, does my hon. Friend agree that we should find the elusive Conservative who agrees that the public sector pay cap should be lifted?

Peter Dowd: Trying to find a Conservative who practically believes that—you are more likely to find, if you will excuse the expression, rocking horse dung, quite frankly. There is more chance of finding that.

Dan Carden: It seems that the Conservatives want to be seen to be softening the language on austerity and on pay caps, but in truth we see no action. Does my hon. Friend agree?
7.2 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Jones): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer.

I thank all Members who have contributed to the debate today. We have had 37 Back-Bench contributions or interventions. I have to say that there was remarkable knowledge from the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) about the 1823 Act—194 years ago; I am not even sure the Conservative party existed then.

Lots of points have been raised. Let me answer the one by the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) about Northern Ireland. The decision and implementation is actually with the Northern Ireland civil service. I do not think that there are any decisions outstanding with Ministers, but of course the key thing is to get that Administration back up and running and hope the parties in Northern Ireland can find the common ground to achieve that.

Housing and housing challenges have been raised, which is entirely fair. It has been very tough for people all over the country to deal with housing costs, whether those relate to getting on the housing ladder or not. I have to say that I do not think that is an entirely private sector or entirely public sector issue. It applies equally to everybody right across the country and that is why housing was the centrepiece of the Budget.

David Linden: Will the Minister give way?

Andrew Jones: I will get going first, and then I will come back to the hon. Gentleman.

Members also raised the paradise papers—the tax evasion papers. We have not actually seen those papers yet, because they would not be provided to Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, but the point remains. Should we be bearing down on anybody who is not paying their fair share of taxes? Absolutely, and that is why this Government have taken more action to do so than any other Government in history and have raised £160 billion from it since 2010.

Many Members have paid tribute to those in our public services, and I would simply agree. Within our society, public sector workers are among the most hard-working, talented and committed people. There are more than 5 million public sector workers right now, right across the UK. They carry out essential roles: they keep our streets safe; they teach our children; and they work day and night in our hospitals. At Christmas time in particular, they will be working when many others are enjoying time off with their families, and we should pay tribute to them for that and recognise their contribution. We should also recognise the contribution of those working overseas, who see their families even less frequently. The hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) said that they go the extra mile and deserve respect, and I entirely agree. But the right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar), who I do not think is still in his seat, said that those on the Government side of the House see them as the enemy, and I am afraid that is just wrong. I do not think that anybody sees our public servants as the enemy.

Chris Stephens: Does the Minister believe that when a Government pay their own workforce decently the whole country benefits from the increased tax revenue generated and the increased spending it allows?

Andrew Jones: I will come to the issue of payment. It is of course part of a balanced approach to delivering public services, but I will address the hon. Gentleman's point later.

I would like to re-emphasise the point that nobody on our side of the House in any way thinks that public sector workers are the enemy. I entirely agree with the hon. Lady's point that modern economies have a mixture of public and private and the two are interrelated and work strongly together.

Laura Pidcock: For clarity, not one Conservative Member of Parliament has written to the Speaker to speak on behalf of public sector workers on the pay cap. They may not be the enemy, but there is a strong lack of interest in public sector workers.

Andrew Jones: I think that perhaps the hon. Lady is getting a bit carried away. We have no idea what the motives are for people being or not being at this debate. I have certainly been here in debates where there has been no Labour Member of Parliament, but I have not sought to make some kind of cheap political point off the back of it, because that is simply not appropriate and not reasonable.

To recap, the Government are acutely aware of how public sector workers form the backbone of our society and again I join Members in paying tribute to them. We have also had some questions about the reasons for pay policy. It is fair to remind the House that in 2010 we inherited the biggest deficit in our peacetime history. There was an urgent need to get public spending under some control, and that has been a key ingredient in returning our economy to health. The coalition Government implemented a two-year pay freeze, which has been mentioned several times by Members during the debate, but I remind the Labour party gently that it supported that policy at the time. The pay freeze was followed by a series of 1% pay awards for public sector workers. In the autumn Budget the Chancellor—he did mention this, I point out to the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd)—reconfirmed that under this Conservative Government the policy would end. It was a reconfirmation because that had been previously announced by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury in a statement on 12 September.

What does that mean? That means that for 2018-19 the Secretaries of State will have much greater flexibility in how they consider pay awards for public servants. I will return to the substance of the Chancellor's announcement in a few moments, but first I will highlight the scale of the challenge. Public sector workers account for roughly £1 in every £4 that the Government spend, so we are dealing with some enormous sums of money here. The public sector pay bill in 2016-17 was £179.41 billion. That was an increase of 3.6% on the previous year, when it was £173.2 billion. There is a ginormous scale to the amount of money that has to be found. That leads me to one of the factors in determining pay policy: getting the right balance between finding the money and rewarding public servants for their vital work, while being fair to all taxpayers and ensuring that we return our public finances to balance.

Peter Dowd: In line 11 on page 4 of “Funding Britain’s Future”, Labour shows exactly how it would fund lifting the pay cap. Can the Minister be as explicit and comprehensive as Labour has been on this matter?
Andrew Jones: I am not entirely sure that the Labour election manifesto, which claimed that their policies were fully funded, was 100% accurate. Perhaps we could go back to some of the rather awkward interviews that the shadow Chancellor gave in the media over the weekend.

Chris Stephens: The Minister talked about the size of the pay bill. Have the Government done any research on its size and how much activity has generated in the wider economy?

Andrew Jones: The hon. Gentleman asked whether the Government have done research on the size of the pay bill; I have just detailed the numbers. We are acutely aware of how public spending has an impact across the country. Any expenditure has an impact on the local economy as money recirculates, so of course that point is understood.

Rachael Maskell: Will the Minister give way?

Andrew Jones: I am being very generous, but I will give way to a fellow north Yorkshire Member.

Rachael Maskell: I am grateful; I am looking forward to hearing about the Government’s generosity, because I want to know how much the Treasury is expecting public sector workers to receive in the total package, or the total envelope. How much—the figure?

Andrew Jones: I will come on to the process ahead. Despite the difficult economic circumstances from 2010, the Government have continued to invest in our public servants. We are helping them, alongside all others, to keep more of their money by increasing the personal allowance. That is a significant change. In 2010, the personal allowance stood at £6,475, but in the Budget only a few days ago, the Chancellor announced that in April 2018, the allowance will rise to £11,850. That means that public sector workers on a basic rate of tax will be £1,075 a year better off compared with 2010.

Helen Jones: Does the Minister accept, first, that most of the money spent on raising the tax threshold actually benefits the better-off? Secondly, does he accept that the combined effects of the Government’s tax and benefit changes, even when raising the tax threshold is taken into account, has been to hit low-paid families in work hardest?

Andrew Jones: I do not accept that. I have looked at the distribution analysis and what the hon. Lady said is simply not the case.

We have not just helped through the personal allowance. We have invested a further £100 million to recruit 2,500 extra police officers, and in July, my right hon. Friend the Education Secretary announced an additional £1.3 billion for schools to support the transition to the national funding formula. Let us go back to the NHS; in the Budget, the Government announced an additional £6.3 billion of new funding for the NHS. As I mentioned, we reconfirmed in the Budget the ending of the 1% public sector pay policy. That means that the Government are no longer pursuing a one-size-fits-all policy on pay for public servants.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): This was before my time, so correct me if I am wrong: a few years ago it was voted through that Members of Parliament would receive a pay increase. If the principle was right then for MPs and it was seen to be appropriate, why is it not appropriate for all our public sector to receive a pay increase?

Andrew Jones: The hon. Gentleman is perhaps not absolutely correct about the process. That also predates my time in the House and goes back to the expenses crisis in 2007 and 2008. Any hon. Members who have been here a bit longer are welcome to jump in, but I think that at that point, Parliament basically gave all responsibility for its pay rises to an independent body. Since then, I do not think that it has voted on the matter. I have certainly never voted on Members’ pay. I recognise that that is a contentious point, but Parliament is no longer responsible for its pay.

David Linden: I accept that IPSA decided on MPs’ pay, but does the Minister not accept the absolute reality, which is that all of us are on at least a basic salary of £76,000 a year? He gets an extra allowance on top of that. Does he understand why members of the public watching this debate will find it absolutely bizarre to see a Minister earning such a high salary telling public sector workers that they should not be paid a basic rate?

Andrew Jones: Nothing the hon. Gentleman said about what I have said is remotely accurate—I have not said that public sector workers should not be paid a decent salary—so I am afraid I do not accept at all the point he makes. It is right that Secretaries of State have the responsibility to determine the right pay award for their workforces. That is because across the public services, each workforce is different, with different requirements, starting points, starting salaries and allowances, and each faces different recruitment and retention issues. Following the announcement, Departments will be able to fund appropriate pay rewards for their workforces from their existing budgets, just as we have done in the Ministry of Justice.

Liz McInnes: I want to make a point about IPSA and independent pay review bodies. NHS workers went on to Agenda for Change terms and conditions. One attraction of that was that it gave NHS staff access to a pay review body, but the Government have been overriding the recommendations of pay review bodies since 2010. The analogy just does not work: the Government have not overridden IPSA’s decisions, but they have overridden the NHS Pay Review Body’s decisions.

Andrew Jones: I draw the hon. Lady’s attention to the interview given by the shadow Chancellor yesterday in which he said that public sector pay reviews were always subject to negotiation. Perhaps he needs to have a conversation internally first.

Before any decision on pay is made, there is indeed a well-established process for the consideration of pay across the public sector. For local government workers, pay awards are considered by the National Joint Council for Local Government Services. Firefighters have the corresponding National Joint Council for Local Authority Fire and Rescue Services. The vast majority of the
remainder are people employed in workforces with an independent pay review body. As part of the process, Departments will shortly submit evidence to the corresponding pay review body for their workforces.

Rachael Maskell: I must correct the Minister on what he has just said. Pay review bodies make a recommendation to Government, and the Government then do or do not accept it. There is no negotiation process in place.

Andrew Jones: I accept that—I was actually quoting the shadow Chancellor. Let me press on. The pay review bodies will consider evidence from stakeholders, including employers, Governments and unions, and they will make their recommendations in spring and summer next year. Secretaries of State will use the recommendations to inform their pay awards in the normal way. The PRBs’ recommendations will recognise the wider economic context. The need remains for continued fiscal discipline, and Departments will take that into account when making any decisions.

Many Members have mentioned the NHS, which I want to spend a bit of time discussing. First, the Government are entirely committed to the NHS. Funding for the health service is at record levels. [Interruption.] Opposition Members may mock, but funding is in fact at record levels. They should be doing what we are doing, which is backing the service.

We know that pay restraint has been challenging and we are listening to the concerns of NHS staff and their representatives. We recognise that the NHS now faces greater pressures than at any point in its history, and the reasons for that are an ageing population, which is a significant challenge for western economies, and the greater demand that we are therefore seeing for NHS services.

Matt Western

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab) rose—

Andrew Jones: I have given way already to the hon. Gentleman, so I will give way to the hon. Lady.

Catherine West: Does the Minister accept that there is a link between the current crisis in numbers of nurses in the NHS and the pay on offer, particularly given the huge student debts that many nursing graduates have? It is up to £54,000 for those at London Metropolitan University. Does he believe that there is any link between a starting salary of £21,500 and a huge student debt of £54,000 for nurses?

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members who wish to intervene on the Minister that there are 10 minutes left. I am sure that people would like to hear from the Chair of the Petitions Committee after the Minister. Time is now beginning to get tight.

Andrew Jones: I was not watching the clock, so thank you, Mr Stringer.

I recognise that starting salaries and debt are clearly related for people making choices, but our NHS provides a magnificent career with long-term security and pay progression. The current average salary for a nurse is £27,635, which is very near the national average salary. Nursing presents a great career.

I mentioned earlier the pressures within the health service. That is why the Chancellor announced at the Budget that if the Health Secretary’s ongoing discussions with the health unions bear fruit, he will provide further funding for pay awards for Agenda for Change staff. That will, of course, follow the pay review body process in the spring. We cannot prejudge those discussions or the pay review body process, but we want the talks to succeed, and we share with NHS workers the common objective of a highly skilled, compassionate, productive workforce working to improve outcomes for patients. The Chancellor made his public commitment with that in mind.

I re-emphasise that the Government are committed to providing fair pay awards across the public sector. That is why we have the pay review body process, which ensures that pay for public sector workers is fair to all sides. We must also recognise the depth of public feeling on the issue, which the 150,000 signatures on the petition demonstrate. The 1% pay policy is ending, as announced on 12 September and reconfirmed in the Budget on 22 November. However, it is important to remember that we now face the established processes for determining those pay awards, and we cannot prejudge them. I cannot comment on a report that has not yet been written.

For that reason, the Government have not set out an explicit target for public sector pay, but I can provide an assurance that this Government will take the recommendations into account. We will continue to invest in our public services and ensure that our public sector workers continue to be fairly remunerated. They deliver a fantastic level of public service on which we all rely, and that will continue to be the case under this Government.

7.23 pm

Helen Jones: It has been a great pleasure to listen to this debate. I thank all hon. Members on this side who have spoken. I feel sorry for the Minister, who is normally a reasonable soul, because he has been sent here to defend the indefensible. As hon. Members on the Government side have slipped away, I thought at one point that he would be left solely with his Parliamentary Private Secretary, chuntering from a sedentary position behind him. The hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) ought to learn that PPS’s are supposed to be, like Victorian children, seen and not heard.

We have heard from the Minister, once again, the same warm words for our public sector workers: hard-working, talented and committed. What we did not hear from him, significantly, was an agreement to fund a decent pay rise for them. Once again, the Government are deflecting blame. They say, “Yes, you can have a pay rise. Go away and negotiate it; we’re just not giving you the money for it.” That is the problem; that is what they have done all along. I say again that our public sector workers deserve better than that. They deserve far more than warm words. No one is asking for them to be paid an extravagant salary, merely a salary that enables them to live decently. That should not be too much to ask in 21st-century Britain, but it appears that it is too much to ask from this Government.
[Helen Jones]

It is significant that no Conservative Members made a speech during this debate. They too must know that the policy is indefensible. They have public sector workers in their constituencies; they must have seen what is happening to them. They should not be complicit in this policy. They need to tell their Government and their Whips Office that this situation cannot continue. We on this side are clear that public sector workers ought to be able to negotiate a decent pay rise and have it funded; it is time for those on the Government side to realise that as well. Otherwise, their warm words about people in the public sector will be seen as so much hot air.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 200032 relating to public sector pay.

7.26 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Tuesday 5 December 2017

Tolls on the Mersey Crossings

9.30 am

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered tolls on the Mersey crossings.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. Although the motion is in my name, it is very much the result of a team effort, as demonstrated by the number of right hon. and hon. Members on the Labour Benches today.

The issue of tolls on the new Mersey crossing has caused consternation across our sub-region and, for me, today’s debate centres on two pillars: deceit and inconsistency. In the mid to late-1950s, the Runcorn-Widnes crossing was a transporter bridge, the likes of which we now see only really in Middlesbrough, so when the new bridge was opened at the start of the 1960s it was a revolutionary leap forward in transport infrastructure. The Runcorn-Widnes bridge, the green bridge, the Silver Jubilee bridge—as it became after renovation in 1975—or even, simply, the bridge, grew as an essential artery for the sub-regional traffic, and it can be argued that the success of the area, from the growth of Liverpool airport to the industrial areas around Speke, Widnes and Runcorn and the new multimodal hub, has all been possible because of the crossing. But with its more than 80,000 vehicle movements per day, it was clear that the old bridge was beyond capacity and that, having been a source of growth in the past, it was in danger of becoming a brake on growth and development.

I say at the outset that I welcome the new crossing. The fact that we have a new bridge is not the issue. I also acknowledge that the tolls did not come as a surprise. How we pay for the new crossing has been a matter of debate since the project was first mooted, and that is where the inconsistency comes in. At this year’s Conservative party conference, the Secretary of State for Wales told the assembled masses, in relation to the removal of tolls from the Severn bridge, I was most perturbed to hear that, and perhaps the Transport Minister here today might pass the concerns of the assembled right hon. and hon. Members back to the Minister for the Northern Powerhouse. In relation to attributing views to the Mayor of the city region that he does not hold, I understand that the Mayor, Steve Rotherham, has today written to the Minister for the Northern Powerhouse, asking for a retraction. I hope that retraction will come as quickly as the Minister’s original comments.

In relation to the Severn bridge, I can well understand the argument that the costs of the bridge might have been paid off by the tolls received in preceding years, but the arguments made by the Secretary of State for Wales about economic growth and bringing communities together apply in this debate as well. Indeed, they seem to apply in Scotland, where the new Forth crossing is untolled, and in London, where many millions of pounds of Government money go simply into studying the feasibility of Crossrail 2. The same principle applies in the east of England, where plans for the A14 upgrade to be tolled around Huntingdon and Cambridge were scrapped in 2013. The planned toll was described as a ‘tax on East Anglia’ by the local chamber of commerce. The principle applies everywhere, it seems, except to the Mersey crossing. Indeed, in contrast to the growth potential of infrastructure, the Freight Transport Association tells me that some of its members face an annual cost of £1.5 million in tolls from the new Mersey crossing, which will kill business, not boost it, and that is without the admin costs of keeping fleet lists registered and up to date for so many different toll schemes.

It was announced that most, but not all, residents of Halton Borough Council would get reduced tolls, which is understandable on the basis that it brings together two parts of that cross-river borough. But that brings me on to, if I may use the term, the question of deceit. Just days before the 2015 general election, on a campaign visit to the area, the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, late of this parish, announced that free crossings would be extended to Warrington and to the borough of Cheshire West and Chester. In a tweet on 23 April 2015, Mr Osborne said: “Confirm we’ll extend free bridge tolls to residents of Cheshire W & Chester + Warrington—a victory for”. and he then named two local Conservative party candidates. That was naked political opportunism, but having said that he would extend the free scheme to neighbouring boroughs, he should have made good on the promise. To make such a clear political declaration and then reverse it after the election denigrates politics, denigrates elected politicians—because the public will not always see it for what it really is—and degrades confidence in our democracy.

I am told, although I cannot prove it for certain, that Mr Osborne took his own officials by surprise, at which point a solution had to be found to implement the promise he had so glibly made in the pursuit of cheap votes. It seems that the solution was to say that residents of the neighbouring councils would indeed benefit from reduced tolls, but that the councils would have to pay for it, which was not what was promised by Mr Osborne. And when we take into consideration that Cheshire West and Chester—I cannot speak for Warrington—had its budget cut by central Government by £57 million from 2015 and is barely able to deliver statutory services, we can understand why once again passing responsibility
on to local government to deliver a central Government policy pledge without providing the requisite finance—a tactic we have seen several times from this Government—has engendered such cynicism from residents.

At no point has any Minister either apologised for the deceit or, indeed, recognised the wrongness of it, and that adds to people’s anger about being misled. Nor has Mr Osborne ever faced the required obloquy for his deceit. I am clear that the tolls must go, but I am also trying to find a practical way through the mess for my constituents who use the bridge daily, and the many others who work on the other side of the water who now have to pay upwards of £1,000 every year to get to work. This is a retrospective tax that is simply unfair.

My constituent Clive has proposed a solution to Ministers, which is that anyone who could demonstrate that on the day the tolls were announced they had a permanent job on the other side of the water would be eligible for reduced tolls. He also pointed out that the number would only ever diminish over time; it would never increase. Ministers have rejected the idea on the basis of the cost to the scheme, but they are happy for the public to bear the cost burden. Perhaps today the Minister might consider that option again for those residents who have suffered the double whammy of being told they were to get free tolls only for that to be withdrawn, and then being hit with an annual £1,000 charge just to get to work.

As my constituent Rob, a teacher, told me:

“Recently, I have registered for the Merseyflow sticker for my car so that I can cross the new multimodal bridge to get to my work in a school in St Helens. I am not resident in Halton and I am therefore ineligible for anything other than a sticker, which reduces each crossing from £2.00 to £1.80. Whilst I am grateful for this reduction, my annual bill for using the bridge will surpass £720. This does not include any times where I may have to make the crossing more than twice in a day (Open Evenings, Prom etc.).”

The situation has been further compounded because the original bridge, now closed for renovation, will itself be tolled when it reopens. As my constituent Tim pointed out to me, the equivalent would be that when the M6 toll was opened, the original M6 would also have been tolled—a clearly ludicrous suggestion, but equivalent to what we have here.

Operational matters are also causing problems. Now, all four crossings on the Mersey are tolled. The first two are run by Mersey Tunnels and the second two by Merseyflow. I cannot for the life of me see why we should have to register twice with different organisations just to get across the Mersey from Chester. Ideally—the Minister might want to consider this—all the tolled roads in the UK would have one central tagging or registration scheme. To have two in such a short distance is daft. Organised bodies such as road haulage organisations and fleet operators will have to register all their fleets twice because of the two different schemes.

I am told that the signage on the new crossing is inadequate, both to notify drivers that the bridge is tolled and to inform them how to pay. I am also told that upwards of 50,000 instances of non-payment have taken place already, totalling £1 million, which, in only six weeks of the crossing being open, is a staggering amount, if true. It must surely indicate that something somewhere is going badly wrong.
not to happen in the immediate future, will the Minister at least look at alternative arrangements for my constituents and others who are being clobbered by toll charges and fines?

9.43 am

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley, and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson), who made a very powerful case. I will be brief, because there are one or two straightforward arguments that need to be put. Before I get into those arguments, it is important to emphasise the point that my hon. Friend made: a commitment was given to a group of residents on the Cheshire side of the bridge by the former Chancellor of the Exchequer, and that commitment has now been completely ignored by the Government. I have no doubt that in that general election some people voted the way they did in the expectation that exemptions would be made for a wider area. However, that would not have covered my side of the river, and I will talk about that in a moment.

At the outset, I should say that I make no criticism of Halton Borough Council. I know that it was effectively given a choice of having no bridge or having tolls. Given the need for a further crossing, I can well understand why it took that decision. My hon. Friend for Halton (Derek Twigg) will make that point more fully, if he is fortunate enough to catch your eye, Mr Paisley.

Over the past two years, myself and others have been trying to get some further exemptions. If it was right for the people on the Cheshire side of the new crossing to have exemptions, as promised by the former Member for Tatton, George Osborne, it equally would be right for the people in Knowsley, Liverpool, Warrington, St Helens and even north Wales to have some exemptions. I tried to press that point, and I eventually got a reply from a Transport Minister that hinted that it was legally all too difficult to do. The spread of Members attending this morning’s debate tells the story, because if the exemption was extended to, for argument’s sake, the City of Chester, how could that be justified when people from Knowsley or Liverpool have to travel in the opposite direction? I think it probably is too legally difficult to make exemptions.

I also argued that there should be exemptions for those who have to use the crossing for work purposes, or for people who need to attend medical appointments, or—it would be relatively few people—those who have to use the crossing for educational purposes. I think we have exhausted that argument, and the Government, possibly for those legal reasons, are not going to accept the argument, but we are still left with the problem. I have constituents—my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester referred to this—who are paying up to £1,000 a year to go to work and back. I understand entirely why they see that as an additional tax. For those not on a high wage, such as many of my constituents, £1,000 a year is a substantial amount of money to pay just to go back and forth to work. That is not even counting the cost of putting petrol in the car and keeping it on the road. Certainly those who need to use the crossing for regular medical appointments have every reason to be annoyed about what is happening.

That argument has now gone, and with Ministers having rejected further exemptions for people in Knowsley, Liverpool and other places, I have come to the conclusion that, expensive though it will be, the only way forward is for the tolls to be scrapped altogether. I can see no other way of doing it that would not be open to some sort of legal challenge. I realise that is a very expensive option, but it is the only fair one. I hope Ministers will accept that. I put it forward not to be irresponsible, but to be fair to those who need to use the crossing for their everyday lives and to go to work. By the way, the issue also applies to businesses. We have all been approached by businesses that are at best confused about how the toll affects them and at worst furious about the additional costs it puts on their transactions. For the benefit of residents and businesses, the only way forward that I can see is, as some have said, to scrap the tolls.

9.49 am

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): I will concentrate on the three or four key issues in this area that most constituents contact me about; I cannot concentrate on every issue that every constituent has raised with me.

I would like to put on record my congratulations to Halton Borough Council. It is a fantastic achievement to have delivered this huge infrastructure on time and to budget when the council is probably one of the smallest in the country. If central Government had that record, they would probably be a bit more pleased about some of their recent projects. It is excellent delivery by the council. Of course, there are some teething and snagging problems and other issues that hon. Friends have raised, but I want to concentrate on three or four main issues.

First, I absolutely agree that we should have a bridge with no tolls. That has always been my position. Certainly longer-standing hon. Friends here have supported having a new bridge, but not one that is tolled. Why should we have all the tolled crossings when London and the south-east have crossings on the Thames where people do not have to pay? I keep being told it is an estuary crossing, but why does an estuary crossing differ from the one a little further upriver, as is the case on the Thames? It is bizarre. I totally agree with my hon. Friends that the bridge should be toll-free.

However, the bridge is not toll-free. It was clear from the beginning of the discussions I have had with the Government since the early 2000s and thereafter—the previous Labour Government, the coalition Government and the Conservative Governments—that there would not be a crossing if it was not tolled. The decision letter from the Secretary of State stated:

“The Inspector said that the £604 million cost of the Project would be funded by toll revenues and PFI credits... The Secretary of State wishes to clarify first that the Project is intended to be funded from a mixture of toll revenues, PFI credits and RFA funding.”

That funding range has now changed, but that is what was said. On charging tolls on the Mersey Gateway bridge and the Silver Jubilee bridge, the decision letter stated:

“While noting that there was opposition to both the principle and perceived effects of tolling, particularly as regards the imposition of charges on the Silver Jubilee Bridge, the Inspector said it was clear that the Mersey Gateway Bridge could proceed only if tolled and that an un-tolled crossing would generate significant additional traffic contrary to transport policy. He accepted also that, without tolling the Silver Jubilee Bridge, traffic would not use the Gateway Bridge and the Project would not meet its objectives.”

I do not agree with the decision letter, but that is what was said at the time.
Helen Jones: My hon. Friend is right about the decisions taken and the concern about traffic flows. Does he agree that evidence is now appearing that the tolling on the bridge is increasing traffic flows through Warrington, which is already very congested? And that is after the former Member for Warrington South appeared in the 2015 election in front of a big banner saying, “No tolls”, so people rightly feel aggrieved.

Derek Twigg: My hon. Friend makes an important point. There is increased traffic going through Warrington, which was always expected, and that is causing further congestion. Again, it comes back to this: if a bridge is tolled, some traffic will try to find an alternative route. How long that will go on for, I do not know, but it is having an impact.

The reality is that we needed a new bridge. The Silver Jubilee bridge was congested, its capacity was far exceeded, and it was having an effect on investment in the borough because people were regularly queueing to get over the bridge. Sometimes, if a vehicle broke down or there was an accident, people could be there for hours. There was a regular queue of traffic going over the bridge. It is in need of major repairs as well, which is why it has been shut for about a year to carry out the repairs. Imagine closing that bridge with no other bridge in place: there would be chaos not only in Warrington, but all round the north-west. The fact that the bridge was needed is indisputable, and we need to understand that.

There is also an issue of pollution. Communities around the Silver Jubilee bridge had to cope with all the pollution of standing traffic and huge traffic increases. There was no doubt in my mind about the need for a bridge, but as I say, I want an untolled bridge, as do colleagues. However, we have this situation at the moment, and I look forward to hearing what the Minister will say.

As part of the discussions that I had, I met George Osborne, the former Member for Tatton, along with colleagues Graham Evans, the MP for Weaver Vale at the time, David Mowat and Andrew Miller. My primary aim in having that meeting was to argue that, for Halton people, it is their local road. They use it to go to the hospital, to work and to the train station, to go shopping and simply for normal business. I do not know anywhere else in the country where a borough has a tolled road that people have to cross to get to another part of the borough. It simply does not exist. It would be totally unfair.

George Osborne eventually accepted my argument and agreed that residents in Halton should be able to travel toll-free. He put out a press statement in July 2014 to announce that. I will make this clear for the Minister. The Treasury press release stated that the bridge “will be free to use for all Halton residents”, with “a small charge” for registration. It stated:

“The extension of the discount scheme will apply to...categories of vehicles included in the existing discount scheme.”

I have written to the Department on numerous occasions because around 425 residents in Halton are in bands G and H and, because of the discount scheme, are excluded. The fact is that George Osborne—the Treasury—said that all residents would be able to travel free. I keep getting letters back from the Minister quoting the issue about the local discount scheme, but it is not quoted here. It is clear.

I also wrote to George Osborne, and on 5 December 2015, he wrote:

“I am happy to confirm that as the Government has previously announced, tolls for Halton residents will be free once the Bridge opens.”

That is very clear. There are no ifs or buts, and no mention of excluding people in bands G and H. It is totally unfair for people in bands G and H to be denied the chance to travel free, albeit with a small charge, across the borough. Why should they have to pay? It is completely unfair and not reasonable. I hope the Minister will go away and look at this matter again, because the policy should be changed. Not all of the people in bands G and H are cash-rich. In some cases, people are not on great incomes, but that is not the point. In principle, they should not have to pay. I hope the Minister will look at that issue.

On small businesses, the then Chancellor made a statement—my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) referred to that. I have the press coverage here and witnesses heard him say this. As well as extending the scheme to Cheshire West and Chester, and Warrington, the then Chancellor said there would be “a special scheme” to help small businesses. He added that if firms paid nothing, taxpayers could pick up a higher bill, but he said that there will be a scheme to help small businesses. Of course, once he went, the promise to Cheshire West and Chester, and Warrington, was ditched, so I wrote to Ministers again. Halton businesses have the same issue as residents because they use the bridge a lot more. It is their local base. Again, the Minister wrote back and said there was no way that could be done, and this time used the argument about state aid rules.

I got in touch with the Library to do some research, and the Library believes there is a way of helping at least some small businesses by having a scheme in Halton. Again, the Government have ignored that, after a promise made by the former Chancellor of the Exchequer. I hope the Minister will look at that as well.

Another issue raised regularly with me is about businesses in Halton that might suffer as a result of paying the extra tolls, particularly if they are transport-heavy, such as haulage and delivery companies. Also, the constituents of my hon. Friend here today travel in and have to pay the toll. Some businesses tell me they are fearful of losing experienced and skilled staff who might go elsewhere because they do not want to pay the £1,000-a-year toll. The Minister needs to look at that issue, which has been raised with me by several companies.

The Minister needs to look seriously at some of the promises that were made and should revisit them. Although I want free tolls for everybody, the key issues for me are my constituents in bands G and H, small businesses, staff travelling into Halton and the impact on businesses. Most businesses think faster speed and lack of congestion are great. They are happy with that, but some have expressed concern about paying the toll.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): One thing that frustrates many people who have an interest in this debate is the fact that national leaders seek to blame local leaders. It is very clear that responsibility lies with the Minister. We had promises from the former Chancellor.
It was the Government that announced the scrapping of tolls on the Severn crossing. Is it not right to expect a real answer from the Minister today and not simply, as we saw yesterday, pushing this issue back down on to local leaders?

Derek Twigg: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The fact remains that it was not Halton Borough Council’s decision to make it a toll bridge. I know that because I have been involved with the project from the very start. It was clearly central Government who made that decision.

The solution that has been raised by my hon. Friends today rests with the Government, not Halton Borough Council, which has had its budget cut by over 50%. It is one of the smallest councils in the country and it is struggling on a daily basis to provide the services that its residents need. The solution rests with the Government alone, and they need to look at that very carefully.

In conclusion, the bridge is a great, iconic structure and it is fabulous to have it, but the toll system is causing untold problems. I raised the issues faced specifically by Halton constituents, but I also understand very well the concerns of my colleagues, some of whom will make further points of their own later on.

10 am

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) on obtaining this timely debate, and on the way he set out some of the concerns that have been raised with him. Generally speaking, it is certainly better to have the new bridge than not to have it, and I congratulate Halton Borough Council on taking on the necessary and ambitious scheme to get the bridge built and operating. It is a shame, as a couple of my right hon. and hon. Friends clearly set out, that the bridge has not been delivered in a way that allows my constituents to cross the Mersey at Runcorn without paying a toll.

The Silver Jubilee bridge has been free since it was built in the 1960s. It is now closed, and when it reopens it, too, will be tolled. The tolls, the discount arrangements and the entire administration need to be rethought. I hope that the Minister will be able to give us some comfort on that in his remarks at the end of the debate. I accept that the situation is not primarily the choice of Halton Borough Council; its choice was to build a toll bridge or no bridge, but it is the policy at HMI and Halton Borough Council, which operates the tolls; Merseyflow, Boards Ltd and Halton Borough Council, which commissioned and look after the bridge; or the Government, who intervene when it suits them, then wash their hands of any further need to get involved when it does not. None of those things bodes well for the future smooth operation of these arrangements.

On affordability, I do not believe it is fair that residents living near the bridge in Halton receive almost free travel while my constituents, who have made decisions about where they live and work based on the longstanding availability of an untolled bridge, suddenly have to factor significant extra costs into their calculations. The Silver Jubilee bridge has been available and untolled since the 1960s; when it reopens, it will be tolled at the same rate as the Mersey Gateway.

Liz Simon is a teacher who works in Stockton Heath in Warrington. She has been in her job for seven years and has two young children. She says:

“I now have this additional bill to pay when we are only getting a 1% pay rise in the education sector. This will certainly not cover the £1000 a year toll charges.”

She has had to stop buying school dinners for her children to try to offset the additional costs she faced in getting to work. She says:

“It is frustrating that people who I work with who live in Halton pay £10 a year when ‘as the crow flies’ I live a lot closer (to work) than they do.”

Yet she pays 100 times more than her workmates—almost £1,000.

Another of my constituents, who works at the Countess of Chester hospital, also has to use the bridge daily to get to and from work. As a relatively poorly paid health worker, his pay rises are also capped at 1%, but he suddenly has to pay an extra £1,000. He has cancelled his home insurance, but does not know where he is going to find the other £500 per year he will need to pay the extra cost of getting to work. Understandably in my view, he calls this “a no option commuter tax”.

What does the Minister suggest he does, and is it right that he has had to cancel his home insurance?

I have some constituents who have told me that they will have to give up their jobs because going across the river is no longer financially viable. Some of my constituents, when they are diagnosed with cancer, have to attend the Clatterbridge Centre on the Wirral for treatment on a regular basis over many months. Many of them lose a substantial portion of their income and end up relying on sickness benefits. They are now also having to find the money for bridge tolls, at a time when their income is dwindling and their costs are increasing—one more worry for people who need to avoid worry in order to recover. I have been contacted by constituents in that position who, for understandable reasons, do not want me to reveal their names. There are many similar stories, and my right hon. and hon. Friends have also given some examples.
On the administration of the tolls, the arrangements are unfair and are being operated badly, insensitively and secretively. My constituent, Liz Simon, has already drawn attention in the comments I have quoted to the current anomaly: big discounts for those happening to live within one local authority boundary create inexplicable differences between the treatment of those people and that of individuals who happen to live in other places, because such a demarcation does not take account of the travel-to-work area around the bridge. That can mean people in similar circumstances having to pay 100 times more for crossings over the same bridge.

The former Chancellor, George Osborne, recognised that anomaly when he visited Halton ahead of the 2015 general election. As has been said, he promised to consider financing a similar discount scheme to that operating for Halton residents for those living in Cheshire, Cheshire West and Chester, and Warrington. I am sure that it was an oversight on his part to miss out my constituents in Liverpool and Knowsley, as well as people living in St Helens, who also abut the whereabouts of the bridge. The alternative explanation, offered by some Members in today’s debate, that he was offering discounts only to those living in Tory marginal seats ahead of the general election cannot possibly be true: it would be a breach that the Treasury’s accounting officer would not let him get away with indulging in. The fact that the current Chancellor has not gone ahead with his predecessor’s scheme—indeed has not deigned, as yet, even to reply to my letter asking him to consider it—does not negate the great good sense of having a much fairer tolling scheme than the one currently in place.

In addition, can it be right that a £2 toll attracts a £40 fine for non-payment that escalates to £60 if unpaid for a month? I know that payment within 14 days cuts the penalty to £20, but that is still extortionate. The Liverpool Echo reported yesterday that between £1 million and £3 million has been charged in penalties within a month of the bridge opening. Indeed, some people feel as if the arrangements are specially designed to catch them out—again, some of my hon. Friends have referred to that in their remarks.

The signage just after the bridge opened was not clear, and it is still possible to drive over the bridge, unable to see the instructions about how and when to pay. The free-flow system has the advantage of not requiring cars to stop, but has the disadvantage of allowing people to incur costs without realising it. Elderly people and those not used to paying for things online are particularly disadvantaged, as are casual visitors, who often do not even realise that the bridge is tolled. I have had contact on social media from people passing by who end up with a fine and—I might say—a very bad impression of Liverpool because they feel they have been trapped into incurring a charge that they were unaware existed. Businesses are also suffering in administrative and financial terms.

What about tractors? You might not be aware of this, Mr Paisley, but I represent a small number of arable farmers. They were told that there would be no tolls for their tractors. After all, they do not pay road tax, or have number plates on the front. In addition, the plate on the trailer does not have to be the same as the plate on the tractor. However, they are having to pay and, as a consequence of the lack of visible number plates on the front of the tractors, they are incurring fines. That may not seem like a large problem, but to a small number of arable farmers it is a serious issue. Merseyflow, the operator of the bridge, has refused to meet them or to address the issue with the National Farmers Union and has just said that it is all fine. I do not think that is sufficiently responsive.

The system has been going wrong. I have heard from people who have had penalty notices when they have paid and people who have had penalty notices when they are exempt. The Liverpool Echo reported that Alison Hill’s husband had received 10 penalty charge notices demanding £220 in total, even though he is a Halton resident exempt from the charge and registered his vehicle in August. My constituent Phillip Grace has had penalty charge notices totalling £616 for 28 crossings because the signage detailing how to pay was missing for the first few weeks of operation.

My constituent Angela Hitchmough paid for a monthly pass for her car—£100 in total, with a £10 registration fee. Three weeks later, she changed her car but was told that she could not transfer her pass to the new vehicle. She has had to lose a week’s worth of travel, register the new car and buy a new monthly pass. She uses the car to go to work part time in Runcorn, so those extra expenses are considerable for her.

On accountability, the organisations in charge of the bridge and the tolling arrangement are not helpful; I do not see why they should not be more accountable for their actions in public. They have not shown much sign of wanting to engage with the public thus far. That needs to change.

Given the complaints I have received, I wanted to know how many people had been fined. I asked a written question, and the Minister told me in a written answer on 3 November:

“The Department for Transport holds no information on the number of people who have been fined”;

and that I should ask Merseyflow. I asked Merseyflow on 6 November to tell me how many fines had been issued since the bridge opened. After further prompting by email and telephone on 4 December, I finally received verbal advice that it would not answer my question and I should put in a freedom of information request to Mersey Gateway Crossings Board.

The Liverpool Echo, as we have heard, was told on 20 November that 50,000 penalty charge notices were issued in the first month of operation. That is a suspiciously round number, but a very large one—fine income of between £1 million and £3 million in one month, depending on how quickly people pay their penalty charge notices. That is all money being taken out of the Merseyside economy.

The chief executive of Halton, David Parr, who, according to the Liverpool Echo, has refused to answer a freedom of information request about what he gets paid as a director of the Mersey Gateway Crossings Board, refused to say how much money had been raised in fines. Instead, he waxed lyrical about how popular the new bridge is. It is popular to some and not to others. Operators need to be much more open and transparent about what is going on and the Government need to collect information and give it out when asked.

[Maria Eagle]
Does the Minister not agree that the answers to the questions about how much money has been raised in fines and how many penalty charge notices have been issued should be in the public domain? Getting answers should not be like getting blood out of a stone, particularly given that the money is coming straight out of the hard-earned cash of local people and businesses, who are struggling to find it. Should the Department not have the information, particularly given the guarantees it has given to stand behind any shortfall? Why should the details of the contract and the scheme not be published as well? The people of Merseyside have a right to know the answers to those and other questions, and the Government, having insisted that Merseyside could only get this bridge if it was majority-financed by tolls, should be at the forefront of making sure that we have access to and transparency in the information, and should not be indulging in their usual trick of blaming someone else.

Many of my constituents cannot afford the extra costs imposed by the Mersey Gateway Bridge and its current tolling arrangements. There should be, and need to be, a full reappraisal of how it works, who pays and how much should be paid, which should include looking at getting rid of tolls completely. We need that review sooner rather than later.

10.14 am

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) on securing this debate and thank the Backbench Business Committee for giving me and my colleagues the opportunity to raise our constituents’ concerns about this important issue in the House.

The tolls on the Mersey crossings are a huge issue for hundreds of thousands of people living in the north-west. My hon. Friends have already commented on the regional disparity in the tolls across the United Kingdom and the inconsistencies in the Government’s policies. They proudly claim the economic benefits of scrapping the tolls on the Severn Bridge; I cannot believe that the disparity in the tolls across the United Kingdom and the damage it will do to the region. The tolling of the Mersey crossings is quite simply causing misery for a huge number of my constituents.

As my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester mentioned, just before the 2015 election, the then Chancellor of the Exchequer came to Warrington and made a commitment to the people of Warrington, and Cheshire West and Chester, that they would be exempt from the tolls. In January 2017, that promise was broken. If I were more sceptical of the Conservative Government of the time, I might suggest that there was some electioneering in the timing of the former Chancellor’s announcement. It is no surprise that the U-turn on the commitment has left many of my constituents with a deep feeling of betrayal.

The new toll leaves residents facing an additional cost of £1,000 per year to make crossings that were previously free. For many, that huge cost is for carrying out everyday activities such as travelling to work or attending hospital appointments. Halton and Warrington hospitals form part of the same NHS trust, yet they are on either side of the bridges so many people are forced to cross them to receive treatment. As one of my constituents with a chronic illness put it to me, the toll is yet another tax on illness for hundreds of people.

I have also been contacted by many NHS staff in my constituency, who we already know far too well are suffering as a result of the public sector pay freeze. They are now expected to take what is in effect a £1,000 pay cut, simply for the luxury of travelling to work. That is a huge financial strain on my constituents, especially for those on the lowest wages. The situation appears even more unfair when we consider that the Government spend more than £1,000 per head more per year on transport in London than they do in the north-west, yet they expect our constituents to spend an additional £1,000, which many of them simply do not have, to carry out everyday activities.

The introduction of the toll is a serious burden on local businesses. One local business, a Freight Transport Association member, has predicted that the tolls alone will cost it an additional £1.5 million.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): Is that not the frustration? The bridge was a chance to enhance connectivity, not just across Liverpool city region but with Wigan, Warrington, Chester and right into north Wales, but if workers in St Helens are having to pay £80 a month, and businesses are having to pay thousands of pounds a year, does it not become a barrier and a disincentive to building our economic region?

Faisal Rashid: I agree with my hon. Friend. It is so important that the Minister addresses how this is affecting businesses and local people and makes a firm commitment today for the region. My constituent says that it will cost his business £1.5 million per year, and there will be administration costs on top of that for completing the necessary paperwork. The millions of pounds that motorists across the region are being forced to spend to make the crossing is money that is no longer being spent in local businesses or used to boost the local economy.

It is not just the financial burden that is affecting local residents. Since the toll bridge opened, I have been contacted by dozens of constituents who have concerns about the increase in traffic in and around Warrington. The town centre is already highly congested at peak times. Naturally, motorists are keen to avoid the toll where they can, and many are opting instead to drive through Warrington town centre. Warrington already attracted almost 200,000 journeys to work before the tolls on the bridges were introduced. Local infrastructure simply cannot take any further increases in traffic congestion. Local people in my constituency and Warrington town do not deserve to suffer any more traffic misery.

Warrington already suffers extremely high levels of air pollution. In 2016, the World Health Organisation highlighted that it had breached air pollution safety levels. The major increase in vehicular movement is having an adverse impact on local residents’ health, and is exacerbating Warrington’s poor air quality problems.

I have raised just a few of the problems with the tolls in the Mersey region. I echo my hon. Friends’ excellent comments, but it is time that words became actions. I
welcomed the opportunity to meet the Minister last month, and I am grateful that he took the time to have discussions with me. He assured me that he would do his best to take action on this issue. I look forward to our follow-up meeting in the new year. However, the issue will not go away until real action is taken to alleviate the burden on our constituents. I would like the Government to commit to undertake an urgent review of the tolling of the bridge. The concessions that have been made to Halton residents were part-funded by £350 million from the Government. There is no reason why the Government cannot fund an extension of that scheme to help people in neighbouring constituencies who have no choice but to use the bridge regularly.

I will go even further: I urge the Government to consider renegotiating the ownership of the Silver Jubilee bridge with private investors with a view to bringing it into public ownership and keeping both Halton crossings toll-free for all residents. The bridge has the potential to be a valuable economic corridor connecting local communities and businesses. It should be part of the national road infrastructure; we should not have sought private investment when building it.

I urge the Government to prove to local people that the north matters. This is only the beginning of a long fight to scrap the Mersey tolls. I will fight for Warrington South every step of the way.

10.23 am

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Thank you for chairing this crucial debate, Mr Paisley. I thank my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson), for securing it.

Like my hon. Friend and other hon. Members, I am opposed to tolls on the Mersey Gateway. As MP for Weaver Vale, I am in a unique position, in that half of my constituents live in Halton and have access to the funding and free travel arrangements that my hon. Friend the Member for Halton (Derek Twigg) referred to. I echo his point that bands G and H council tax payers and small businesses in the Halton part of my constituency should be included in any concessionary scheme, as the previous Chancellor argued in the past. The other half of my constituents live in Cheshire West and Chester, and therefore, like those of the hon. Member for City of Chester, must pay. If the system is unfair to users who, having paid their taxes to the Treasury, are forced to pay again to use the bridge that they have already helped to fund, it is doubly unfair to my constituents whose friends and neighbours get what they perceive to be free travel simply because of their postcode. For them, they are subject to a postcode lottery that they have no choice but to play. Like with other lotteries, they pay to enter only to see somebody else rake in the winnings, but the winner is not a fellow player but a private company making a hefty profit from the private finance initiative.

Before I expand on what the situation means for my constituents, I want to be clear about where the responsibility for the unfairness lies and who has the potential to fix it. Halton Borough Council rightly campaigned for decades for a new bridge across the Mersey. To echo a point made by other hon. Members, it was needed. It is a wonderful piece of engineering and infrastructure. It is iconic, and it certainly has improved connectivity and speed flows across the city region. In the public inquiry, the residents of Halton were given a choice between a toll bridge and no bridge, so it is understandable that they chose a toll bridge. Halton Borough Council’s hands were tied by successive Governments. This was the only show in town.

The best way to fund major infrastructure projects—it always seems to be done like this in other parts of the country, particularly the south-east—is from the Exchequer. The only solution is for central Government to address this issue, as they have done for other crossings across the country. If the Conservative Government can abolish tolls on the Severn bridge, they can do so on the Mersey—including for the Mersey tunnels. If the Conservative party can promise free travel for Cheshire and Warrington during the 2015 election campaign, the Chancellor can honour that promise in government. It was not Halton Borough Council or the Labour party that made and broke a promise to my constituents about bridge tolls; it was the previous Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, and the Government must be held to account for that.

Although I recognise that the bridge has been good news for travel times and is a fantastic piece of engineering, it is clear that the current-set up, as my hon. Friends said, is posing major challenges for people in my constituency and way beyond it. Money is all too often the reason. More than £1 million in fines—arguably more than that now—has been dished out in one month. I have spoken to many residents who have been dealt with harshly and insensitively. There has been poor communication and signage. An elderly woman in Helsby, which is part of my constituency, was fined £80. She was in tears on the phone because she did not know how to access the internet. It was unjust—she was just a couple of days late with the payment.

Constituents are being hit with bills of £150 if their car breaks down, due to some strange contractual arrangement that means they must be towed by an approved private contractor and pay a charge before their car is released from the compound. Membership of the Automobile Association or the Royal Automobile Club does not count, which is also a frustration for those organisations.

Although it is true that the bridge has created hundreds of skilled jobs during its construction, the jobs that support its ongoing operation are with a private company, Emovis. To be clear, as a Labour MP I am very disappointed that it does not recognise a trade union or pay the real living wage. The true benefit to the economy cannot be measured only in travel times, as crucial as they are; it has to be whether the benefits are shared fairly by all residents, as my hon. Friends have argued.

Recently, with others, I have launched a Christmas campaign. I was disappointed with the clear and quick answer I got from some of the powers that be. The clearest illustration of the crossings arrangements was that clear and quick refusal even to consider allowing free travel on Christmas day. Hon. Members may correct me, but we have that for the M65 key tunnels, so on the one day of the year friends and families can visit relatives and so on. They are travelling from all over the country, as hon. Members have said, and we want to
ensure that they do not get caught by that interesting arrangement of a fixed penalty notice. I do not believe that the Government should get in the way of a private contractor offering such a concession at Christmas, but in a recent reply about why it is not possible, comment was made not only on the financial arrangements but on the need for Government permission to offer that concession.

The tolls, however, are not just for Christmas but for a period of about 25 years. Ministers will no doubt point to other crossings and say that the scenario is the same there, but the reality is clearly anything but, as people have already said: the new Forth bridge is toll free; tolls will be abolished for the Severn bridge—I have listened to Ministers’ interesting arguments about the economy—and the Dartford crossing is free at night; and my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester has mentioned the option chosen for the East Anglia road toll. There is, however, no respite for users of the Mersey Gateway. Instead, when the Silver Jubilee bridge reopens next year, that will be tolled as well. My constituency has many unique and welcome claims to fame, but being near to the only place in the country that has two tolled bridges side by side—the Mersey tunnels are tolled too—is a scandalous situation for the people of Merseyside. It is a unique arrangement.

We have heard much from the Government about the northern powerhouse. Words have yet to be matched by actions or funding, but I do believe that some Ministers in this Government genuinely—I hope—want to tackle the regional divide. We understand that tolls on the Humber bridge are in line to be scrapped as part of a future Yorkshire devolution deal and, if that is the case, we would welcome the same for Merseyside, Cheshire and Warrington. As one constituent said to me, if this bridge was across the Thames, it would be free. What better way to prove that the Government want to change the perception than by abolishing the tolls?

I recognise that the Mersey Gateway is a multi million-pound project, and if abolition outright is not immediately feasible, extending to others the deal that Halton council secured would be a step forward. I and my colleagues would welcome sitting down with Ministers to see how that could be achieved as a first step. The £1,100 a year taken away from an individual household income is simply not fair to constituents and is a tax on jobs. It is not good for our economy, and not good for our region. I urge Ministers to join me and my colleagues in looking at things again and to abolish tolls.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): I am about to call the last Back-Bench speaker, but I would like to call the Opposition spokesperson before quarter to 11. I am not imposing a time limit, but I would like you to bear that in mind—I call Justin Madders.

10.35 am

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Paisley, but I am sure I will be finished well within the time. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

I too congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) on securing the debate and on the assiduous way in which he and other hon. Friends and hon. Members have pursued this matter for some considerable time. As we have heard, the issue has caused consternation—my hon. Friend used that word several times—as well as frustration and anger locally. Not only are people being asked to pay a toll when they were told that they would not have to, but they see other toll crossings around the country now becoming free.

I have no wish to list all the crossings where there is no charge, but it is worth setting out some of the headlines so that the Minister may see why our constituents feel so aggrieved by the situation. None of the crossings in Northern Ireland are tolled. None of the road crossings in Scotland are tolled. None of the 18 estuary road crossings in London are tolled. In fact, more than 90% of the tidal crossings in this country are toll-free, with several of those that are tolled due to become free shortly.

I hope that I have established that tolls for crossings are a relatively rare thing, and few crossings in recent memory have had charges imposed on their users. What is even rarer, however, if not unique, is the situation on the Mersey, where an existing free crossing is having charges introduced—just because, heaven forbid, people might want to use it: yes, a road charging scheme that is not about managing congestion or recouping construction costs, but about dissuading people from using the crossing altogether.

On the subject of construction costs, the existing Silver Jubilee bridge was partly funded by Cheshire County Council when Halton was part of it. Should not the successor authority to the council get some sort of refund, or are my constituents expected to pay three times over for this crossing? They pay through the original construction cost, their road tax and the toll for every time they cross the river.

To be clear, my constituents and those of other hon. Members will pay through the nose for the scheme. The toll income is estimated to be about £38 million a year and, as we have heard, fines could well increase that figure. Anyway, Merseylink will be a tidy £113 million better off thanks to taxpayer handouts—the Merseylink accounts put the cost of the bridge at £455 million, yet total Government support for the bridge until 2044 is £568 million. Will the Minister explain where that extra £113 million is going? It is certainly not going to the benefit of my constituents.

To move away from those astronomical figures for a minute, let us look at the human impact. We have heard from hon. Members about how their constituents have been affected. I too have been contacted by many constituents who tell me that they are struggling to cope with the impact of the tolls. Many work in the public sector, be that the NHS, local government or education, where they have, of course, not had a pay rise for seven years, so having to find another £80 a month or so just to get to work is causing them real difficulty. I was very sad to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) describe how some of her constituents were having to think about giving up their jobs as a result—that is completely indefensible.

I will read out the personal account of one constituent who contacted me. She said:

"I live in great Sutton but I work in Knowsley. I work extremely hard, long shifts unsociable hours but I love my job (exercise rehab) I have managed to buy a house by myself and can afford a second hand car but have very few luxuries. With the new Mersey..."
[Justin Madders]

bridge being tolled I am going to find it extremely difficult to get to work £2 each way means £4 a day, £20 a week, £80 a month, £1000+ a year all on top of road tax, fuel, and insurance.”

She added:

“I personally believe this is highly unreasonable, especially as both bridges will be tolled. There is no escape and there is only yourself to cover the costs.”

The nub of it was:

“I feel penalised for working.”

There we have it: hard-working constituents feel that they are penalised for having a job. Is that the message that the Government want to send? We have heard that employers on both sides of the river already say that staff are looking to leave because of the additional cost. When did the so-called northern powerhouse become a tax on jobs?

Talking of the northern powerhouse, it would be remiss of me not to mention the great architect of this grand illusion, George Osborne, who hon. Members have already spoken of today. His promises in this area have proved to be as meaningless as the Evening Standard circulation figures. I remember coming across a voter during the 2015 election who told me that she was considering voting Conservative because she had heard that the then Chancellor would promise to scrap the Mersey tunnel fees. I expressed scepticism at the time, but looking back, he said:

“They will definitely be cut. I think we might be able to go further. I’m quite optimistic that we might be able to go further and abolish them all together”.

When I heard that, I could see why she might have thought that was a pretty clear statement of intent. In fact, it is almost as clear as what he said about the Mersey Gateway tolls. We have heard a number of Members quote things that he said at the time. He also said:

“I think you’ve got the balance right by extending the scheme to residents in Cheshire, Cheshire West and Chester and in Warrington.”

It is pretty clear that a promise was made just before the election, but the two statements about the Mersey tunnels and the Mersey Gateway have proved to be utterly meaningless.

Governments of all persuasions are rightly criticised for making election promises that they cannot keep, but in this case the then Chancellor of the Exchequer made clear and unambiguous financial commitments to the electorate. As for his statement on the cost of extending the free scheme to Warrington and Cheshire West residents, it is worth noting that a detailed study on the cost to the taxpayer was prepared and published in July 2016—more than a year after the promise was first made. It looks as though he said what he did with no costings having been done, and with no apparent intention of it being carried out. That is an indictment of the vacuous, tweet-led and dishonest politics we have too much of in this country.

As we have heard, the current boundaries on who pays and who does not make no sense. People can live close to the crossing in Warrington, or Cheshire West and Chester, than someone in Halton, yet have to pay. I have received complaints, as have other hon. Members, from people about the difficulty they have had in paying.

Having no toll booths at all for the occasional visitor is opening people up to unnecessary fines. As my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) said, that creates a very bad impression with visitors to the region and the area. It should not be forgotten that the bridge is located right by an international airport. My constituents should not have to pay fines or fees at all; they should be exempt from paying altogether and this Government should have the decency to honour their promises.

10.43 am

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) for making such an excellent speech, proving once again that he is the right advocate for the people of the City of Chester. He exposed the fact that across that 20-mile stretch of the River Mersey there is real confusion in the Government’s management of the river crossing and how it is paid for. I thank all my hon. Friends for their powerful speeches.

Before I specifically address the bridge tax, I want to look at what is happening about the disparity and the growing inequality in our country, not least the fact that the north is receiving around a 10th of the economic and transport infrastructure compared with London and the south-east. Of the 18 river crossings in Greater London, not one attracts a toll—Dartford is outside Greater London, of course. Yet in the north-west, we see tolls being extended to bridges that have never had tolls in their 60-year history. This is a region where wages are significantly lower. Therefore, a tax of £4 for a double crossing, which is £1,000 a year, is a real penalty on the north, and is not putting the power back into local people. We heard about the impact that this has on driving congestion in some of the cities, and on air pollution, with air quality deteriorating in places such as Warrington, as my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) mentioned.

We need to look at why we came to the point where we needed a second bridge. I hear what my hon. Friend the Member for Halton (Derek Twigg) said—that it was absolutely necessary—but we must recognise the completely failed public transport infrastructure. I met people from the region who told me how train journeys took so much longer than driving. Therefore, they had no choice. We have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid) that it seems that people do not have the choice of cycling or walking across that bridge. Choices for people in the north are being narrowed. We know that this is all about choices, because we need only to think that last week, the Secretary of State for Transport tried to conceal a deal on public transport with Stagecoach and Virgin, burying £2 billion, which should have gone into the state but was taken out. We could have had an additional £2 billion, which more than covers the cost of these bridges. This is all about choices, which need to be addressed. If that can be done at one stroke, I am sure that this problem can be redressed at one stroke. That makes it even more shocking.

We have heard my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) talk powerfully about the accountability of Merseyflow. People cannot even access information from that company, and we cannot even communicate properly with the company to represent our constituents. It is absolutely crucial...
that the Minister gets control of that company and sorts out some of those really basic issues. We also heard from my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) and others about the impact on local businesses. A penalty is being put on businesses and our public services, not least on Christmas day, when people not only visit their families but go to work for our public services. We heard how people using the NHS are having to pay this tax to cross the river.

We know that there are 80,000 crossings a day, so it is absolutely clear that this is all about enhancing connectivity, improving social mobility—another issue where the Government are in desperate need of solutions—and improving economic growth in one of the country’s most deprived regions. We have to seriously examine why there are four crossings that have to be paid for in the north-west, when there are none in Northern Ireland, Scotland or Wales, with the removal of the tolls on river crossings there. We are down to just seven crossings. I was just looking at the list: funnily enough, it is mostly in Labour areas where people still have to pay tolls.

It is clear the Government will have to bring redress to back up their rhetoric about economic investment. We have heard about how the former Chancellor seems to be planting money trees all over the place. Unfortunately, he then pulls them up after the polls have closed on election night. It is so important that the promises and commitments are followed through. For the residents of Halton, Cheshire, Halton and the whole region, those promises must be honoured. There is a huge disparity. We heard so eloquently from my right hon. and hon. Friends exactly how that disparity and the way in which the system operates do not make logical sense.

Local people have been failed, particularly with the signage not being complete, having to understand a system that is not explained to them, and having to use the internet when perhaps they do not have a digital connection. It is a complete mess. The Minister needs to get a grip and get a hold of this situation to make the changes. Why are local residents having to pay so much for the scheme? I understand that in the Mersey tunnels alone, they have already paid for the cost of those tunnels 23 times, and now they have to pay again not just for the building of the bridge but for the public finance initiative scheme, paying about £113 million more. Surely that is a huge injustice.

I will not take up much more time, because I know that Members want to hear from the Minister. We need him to get hold of this problem, not pass it on to someone else. It is not local authorities’ problem. He needs to take responsibility for this issue and to ensure that he honours the words of this Government, who said they would address the charges—the bridge tax—that residents have to pay.

10.50 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I am grateful to the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) for calling this debate. It is testimony to his chirpiness and to the energy of Labour Back Benchers that they have been able to muster such a crowd after a night like last night. I congratulate them on that, too.

Many issues have been raised that will not merely resonate in the Palace of Westminster but be noted by Halton Borough Council and other local councils, and by Merseyside. I hope that they also have an important wider impact in terms of informing hon. Members’ constituents of the present situation. I have a lot of material to get through, so I am going to be quite quick.

Let me start by pointing out that, contrary to some rumours and suggestions, the Government are very focused on investment in the north, including in the north-west and in and around Liverpool. As the House knows, we have committed to invest £13 billion during this Parliament to improve regional connectivity so that northern towns and cities can pool their strengths and create a single and more interconnected economy. The Liverpool sub-region is a very important part of that policy. As the hon. Gentleman knows, it is a centre of innovation, industry and culture that serves a local population of 2 million and a global population of billions. There are important economic sites in the area, including the Daresbury enterprise zone, Liverpool John Lennon airport and the Omega site in Warrington, but this Government, like colleagues across the House, recognise that the area requires greater investment to support economic growth.

To that end, we have provided nearly £300 million of local growth funding for a number of transport improvements in the region to boost the local economy. Those include the Halton curve, the Warrington waterfront transport infrastructure scheme, improvements at junction 8 of the M62, access improvements to the Knowsley industrial park and the Knowsley expressway, and the M56 junction 11A scheme, which we expect to provide a new junction with the Mersey Gateway bridge and to support the Daresbury enterprise zone. We are doing a lot, and we plan to do more. Subject to future decisions, we could also see improvements such as a high-level crossing of the Manchester ship canal in Warrington and improved access to the port of Liverpool, which is already included in my Department’s road investment strategy.

There has been great growth in this area, and there will be more, with the support of public investment in infrastructure, as has been recognised across the House and in this debate. But it is also clear that, in the middle of all this, the Silver Jubilee bridge in Halton became a victim of the success of the local economy. It is a vital link between the two halves of Halton and one of the few strategic crossings of the Mersey, and it is therefore vital to the wider sub-regional economy, as has been widely pointed out today. It has been upgraded over the years so that it can cater for significantly higher levels of traffic than it was originally designed to accommodate. Nevertheless, as has been recognised, it faced serious congestion, which was holding back local growth. There were delays of up to 10 minutes at peak hours and gridlock on the local network, and there were significant increases in incidents and pollution, as has been recognised. At some point, whether we like it or not, and whatever might have happened to any other river crossing, that bridge would have had to be closed and upgraded. It is important to understand that.

Of course, the new Gateway bridge was itself the product of significant local care, thought and attention. There was a long gestation period, which began before studies in 1994 and included extensive public consultation.
It was always clear that both bridges would be tolled, not just the new one. As has been mentioned, there was a public inquiry during May and June 2009, which was chaired by an independent planning inspector. It considered seven planning applications and legal orders, and those orders were confirmed in 2010.

That is a very important backdrop, because it makes clear the context in which we are presently operating. The new bridge, as a striking addition to the local landscape, is already helping to cut congestion, improve journeys and boost the region’s economy. We have heard that there are already 80,000 journeys a day on it, which testifies to its strength. As Members have recognised, it is an astonishing achievement. It is more than 2 km of bridge and road, with 239 enormous beams weighing up to 106 tonnes. It will create nearly 5,000 permanent jobs and will add an estimated £61.9 million in gross value added from new jobs every year by 2030. As the hon. Members for Halton (Derek Twigg) and for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) said, it is a fantastic achievement to have delivered that scheme on time and on budget.

David Hanson: Will the Minister give way?

Jesse Norman: I have no time. The right hon. Gentleman can ask his question if he wants to, but I really want to respond to the points that have been made.

The Government have provided £288 million so far to fund this piece of infrastructure, on top of the £86 million already provided to Halton to develop the scheme and to pay for land and for decontamination. It has been the policy of successive UK Governments—this Government and previous ones—that major estuarial crossings should be tolled. That has been the case with similar English crossings and with the Mersey tunnels, and it was decided that the Gateway bridge would not depart from that policy.

The tolling proposals have been integral to the scheme and to the financing package for the new bridge. As was recognised, it is a practical impossibility to have a situation in which the new bridge is tolled while the adjacent Silver Jubilee bridge is not. That would mean that most users would opt to use the existing bridge, which would defeat the objective of bringing that bridge back to more local use and upset the agreed financial package. There is nothing new here. These issues were all considered and debated at the public inquiry into the legal orders that Halton Borough Council sought to construct the new crossing.

It is important to recognise that, at the final approval stage in 2014, the then Chancellor announced that the Government would fund the difference, to allow eligible residents unlimited use of the bridges for registered private cars only. As a result, there is a discount scheme for local residents. The residents of Halton are in the unusual position that the existing bridge connects the two parts of the borough either side of the River Mersey. We continue to feel that it is right that those who live in that situation receive free crossings, as is the case with the Dartford crossing in Kent. Many hon. Members said that there is therefore a case to be made for the extension of free tolling to residents of councils beyond Halton. As I have said, we have looked at that, but it is a practical impossibility, for two reasons. First, the cost to the Government and to local authorities would be substantial. Extending the benefit to residents of just the five neighbouring authorities would cost more than £600 million. We would expect the cost to be split according to the ratio that has been used so far. That would leave nearly £370 million to be found by the five councils.

Derek Twigg: Will the Minister give way on the point about bands G and H?

Jesse Norman: The hon. Gentleman raises the issue of people in bands G and H. There has to have been a socioeconomic basis for that, otherwise the problem could not have been addressed without a leakage, but I am very happy to revisit the letter that he received with Treasury colleagues to see whether further consideration can be given to that issue.

I want to give the hon. Member for City of Chester a chance to wind up, so let me say very quickly that it is not fair to point to the crossing on the M4 in Wales as a precedent, because that bridge had been paid for through its tolls. Yes, there have been teething problems and snags. Those are issues for Merseyflow and Halton Borough Council.

Let me conclude by reminding those present of the significant transport investment that the Government have made and wish to continue to make in the Liverpool sub-region. These crossings are the subject of local governance by the relevant bodies and I am delighted that the bridge opened successfully on schedule.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): There is no time for a wind-up speech—whether to allow one is at my discretion—so I will put the Question.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered tolls on the Mersey crossings.
Mineworkers’ Pension Scheme

11 am

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the Mineworkers’ Pension Scheme.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I applied for the debate for one reason: because miners and their families deserve a fair deal from their pension pots. In the time I have, I will talk a bit about the scheme—what it is, what the issues are and what could be done going forward—but first, I want to talk about why it matters.

I have a very personal stake in this because of where I am from and my family. Like much of south Wales, coalmining is a big part of Blaenau Gwent’s history. We were the crucible of the industrial revolution in Wales. Steel and coal propelled the Welsh economy, shaping our landscape and employing hundreds of thousands of people. There were tragedies as well, such as at Senghenydd and Six Bells in my constituency—I could go on.

Like many people in Blaenau Gwent, mining also played a big part in my family. I was named after three colliers—my three uncles on my mum’s side—Nicholas, Desmond and John. I still remember the 1974 coal strike: I went with my Uncle Dessie to pick coal off the patches high above Tredagar to help keep our homes warm. They were all members of this scheme. Working deep underground, miners like my uncles helped keep our country running for decades. It was dangerous work, but they just got on with it. Oakdale colliery, where a lot of my family worked, shut 28 years ago. The British mining industry is almost gone, but what is left is former mining communities such as Blaenau Gwent and pensioners like my uncles.

In 2006, there were 280,000 total members of the scheme. By 2016, there were just over 177,000 members. The scheme projects that that number will fall by about 50,000 in the next 10 years, which would take total membership down to about 127,000—a drop of 55% over 20 years. Those members who are left deserve a duty of financial care from our Government.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I have hundreds of constituents who have paid into the scheme and deserve the money, in contrast to the Government, who have not made a contribution since 1994. In discussions, the Government have said that they do not intend to agree to changes that are not in their interests. This is simply not fair. They need to think again.

Nick Smith: My hon. Friend makes a really good point that gets to the nub of the question we are considering.

I called for the debate following the productive meeting that Labour colleagues and I had with the scheme trustees recently. At the meeting, we looked at ways of improving outcomes for the scheme’s members, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero) for organising it.

On the scheme itself, in 1994, there was an agreement between British Coal pension trustees and the Government. The Government made a guarantee that any pensions earned up until privatisation were safe and would not fall in cash terms. In return, if the schemes were in surplus and doing well, that surplus would be split 50:50, with half going to scheme members and the other half to the Government. The sharing of the surplus is at the heart of our discussion.

Since 1994, the Government have taken £3.5 billion out of the scheme, without making any payments into it. It could be argued that £830 million of that was British Coal’s original share of the surplus being paid back to the Government—I sort of get that and it is a fair point.

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): I am glad that my hon. Friend mentions British Coal. He will know that British Coal made no employer contributions between 1987 and 1995, when a Conservative Government were in power. Does he agree that that was an error by that Government that clearly proves that, in their time in government, they did not care about ex-mineworkers?

Nick Smith: My hon. Friend and neighbour really captures what has happened.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): As my hon. Friend has said, the surplus gets to the heart of the issue. Does he accept that the surplus the Government have received is far in excess of their own expectations for what could have happened?

Nick Smith: My hon. Friend and neighbour, like my hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans), gets right to the bone. Nearly £2.7 billion has come from the scheme to the Government as their share of the subsequent surpluses. That means that the Government have taken the same share as the people who earned the pensions in the first place.

Instead of paying in, the Government act as a guarantor in case things go wrong. That is a good thing and has been helpful—the trustees say that. The Government say that they take the money because they will step in and protect the value of pensions if the fund encounters difficulties. The trustees accept that this protection has enabled them to pursue more lucrative investments than might otherwise have been the case. I would like to be clear: we are glad that the Government guarantee is there. It has made a difference and helped to lead to better returns.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): I have also met the trustees. Does the hon. Gentleman accept what they have said—that the guarantee is the most important part of the agreement, and that they would not wish to give any movement on that guarantee within the scheme for any price?

Nick Smith: The hon. Gentleman is right. When we met the trustees, they told us that the guarantee was important, and I accept that. It has been helpful in terms of pursuing lucrative investments, which have aided scheme improvements and its funding. It has also given miners the peace of mind that the pension they earned will not go down in value, no matter what happens in the markets. It is a good thing. The basic nature of the guarantee is not in dispute. The concern is about how much money is being taken out of the surplus in return for it. That is the question we have to try to tease out.
Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on getting this important debate. The miners feel deceived and that they have been led down the garden path. As he and many colleagues know, there is anger in mining communities because they feel they have been duped. Waiting and waiting for some kind of resolution is not good enough. May we have an inquiry by the Treasury Committee into the scheme? Would he agree with that?

Nick Smith: I agree. More parliamentary consideration of this important initiative and where it goes next would be valuable.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate, the tone of his remarks to date and the manner in which he and colleagues are campaigning. Will he explain why during 13 years of Labour Government the deal with the trustees was not renegotiated at all?

Nick Smith: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point, but this is not about looking backwards but about looking forwards and looking after the hundreds of thousands of people I mentioned in my introduction.

The Government have provided the guarantee, which is an important commitment, but I would like to ask the Minister three things and I would like three answers today, please. How many other pension schemes that the Government guarantee have delivered them a windfall of billions similar to that in this instance? Do the Government still think that the 50:50 share of the surplus is fair? Importantly, will the Government consider taking a reduced share in the future?

It has been estimated that the Government will receive windfalls of £51 million each year between 2016 and 2019—another £200 million. Lots of people feel that that belongs to the retired miners, not the Government, and I agree with them. Today, I call on the Government to revisit the surplus sharing arrangements, and in particular I urge them to meet the trustees of the scheme to chart a way forward. I am sure that I speak for many colleagues in saying that there is support for change in our constituencies, and that we should do the right thing by retired mineworkers and their families. The time has come for a better way to help the trustees support our communities. This is the miners’ money. They earned it through years of hard work at the coalface, and they deserve a better and fairer share of it.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I thank the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) for securing this important debate. I ask hon. Members to bear with me, because while I will probably reach the same conclusion as others, my rhetoric might be slightly different.

Like many hon. Members, a number of my constituents who are beneficiaries of the mineworkers’ pension scheme have contacted me with concerns about its arrangement. I, too, recently met the scheme’s trustees, and had a long and productive discussion with them. The closure of the mines was obviously a major blow to people in my constituency. The mines represented their livelihoods and communities, so I understand why this is such an emotive issue.

I am not here to retread history. Successive Governments have undoubtedly ignored this issue, but the existing scheme also has a number of benefits. The guarantee that the Government provided for this scheme, and careful investment, has meant that the pensions of ex-mineworkers are a third higher than they would have been had the guarantee not been made. We should be clear that, at that time, the profit-sharing arrangement corresponded with the risk assumed by the Government in underwriting the fund. However, times have moved on, and thanks to the scheme’s excellent financial management, investments have thrived and the Government and pension holders have done well. With that in mind, I would like more of the profits from the scheme to go to the people whose hard work and dedication paid into the fund. We cannot rest until we put that right, and I will continue to raise this issue in Parliament.

I have met the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, and I have organised meetings between colleagues and the trustees of the pension scheme. I and colleagues have been told by Ministers that the surplus-sharing agreement is working well, that only the trustees could change it, and that no objections have been raised. However, I have met the trustees, and they want the arrangement to be changed so that miners can benefit from the scheme’s success to a greater and fairer extent. The ball is in the Government’s court. They are forecast to pocket many millions more over the next three years. That is wrong, and it is time to say that enough is enough. It is time for justice for ex-miners and their widows. They have waited long enough.

11.13 am

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I thank the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) for securing this important debate. I ask hon. Members to bear with me, because while I will probably reach the same conclusion as others, my rhetoric might be slightly different.

Like many hon. Members, a number of my constituents who are beneficiaries of the mineworkers’ pension scheme have contacted me with concerns about its arrangement. I, too, recently met the scheme’s trustees, and had a long and productive discussion with them. The closure of the mines was obviously a major blow to people in my constituency. The mines represented their livelihoods and communities, so I understand why this is such an emotive issue.

I am not here to retread history. Successive Governments have undoubtedly ignored this issue, but the existing scheme also has a number of benefits. The guarantee that the Government provided for this scheme, and careful investment, has meant that the pensions of ex-mineworkers are a third higher than they would have been had the guarantee not been made. We should be clear that, at that time, the profit-sharing arrangement corresponded with the risk assumed by the Government in underwriting the fund. However, times have moved on, and thanks to the scheme’s excellent financial management, investments have thrived and the Government and pension holders have done well. With that in mind, I would like more of the profits from the scheme to go to the people whose hard work and dedication paid into it, and I ask the Government to consider changing the profit-sharing model in line with the fund’s success.

Mansfield has long felt ignored and alienated from Westminster, and it has never believed that this place has its best interests at heart. As the constituency’s new Conservative MP, I want that attitude to change, and I urge the Government to revise their share of profits from the scheme down to a fairer but sustainable level, without compromising that guarantee. It is now time to have that discussion directly with trustees, and to show that a Conservative Government have a commitment to supporting coalfield communities in the future.

11.15 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship for what
I think the first time, Mr Paisley—I hope it will not be the last—and I thank the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) for securing this debate, and other hon. Members for their contributions.

Pensions are complex, and I asked to respond to this debate on behalf of the Government because I was previously the Pensions Minister. Although I was not involved specifically with this case, that role gave me—I hope—an understanding of all aspects of pension funds. The Philip Green case received a lot of publicity, and there are lots of other cases, but this is the first time that I have come across a pension fund in such a situation of surplus, compared with the usual story these days of low interest rates and low returns for investors.

In his eloquent speech, the hon. Gentleman asked whether there were other schemes of a similar nature, and the only one that I have come across—again, this was in my previous role—is the rail workers’ pension scheme, which, as I remember, was significantly in deficit all the time. I have not previously come across this type of circumstance, but if by chance I find other examples, I will meet or write to the hon. Gentleman.

I know that time is limited and the hon. Gentleman may want to respond to the debate, so I will do my best to keep within the time allowed. The mineworkers’ pension scheme is big—it has 177,000 members, pays pensions at an annual cost of more than £800 million, and has assets in excess of £11 billion. It is managed by the trustees. The Government’s role is as guarantor. Officials in the Department meet the trustees regularly to discuss the operation of the scheme. Many hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley), have also met those trustees—they seem rather more open to meeting than other trustees I have known, which is good. I have not had the chance to meet them, but if I had had, I certainly would have done.

When the scheme was set up in 1952, members contributed no more than 20p a week, and benefits were small. From 1975, contributions and benefits were linked to members’ salaries, with British Coal making up the difference. At privatisation, the Government took on the role of British Coal, and the scheme had a surplus in 1994, half of which was used to enhance members’ pensions immediately, with the other 50% payable to the guarantor. The Government of the day agreed to leave their share of the surplus in the scheme as an investment return. Those arrangements were agreed between the trustees and the Government in their role as guarantor—hence the mineworkers’ pension scheme of 1994. At that time, all parties believed the equal sharing to be a fair settlement—this arrangement did not come about in conflict or anything like that; it was agreed to be a fair way of proceeding. The Government receive their share not because of their guarantor status—that is a big issue in the financial world, because it allows a much greater risk profile than a normal pension fund could have—but also because of the contributions that they have made to the scheme to make up the pool of money. Again, neither of those points are particularly controversial in themselves.

The guarantee means, of course, that however bad the work of the trustees—it is not bad; please do not think I am saying that, but in theory the trustees could be really poor investors who did not do their job—the Government would have to stand by and underwrite the money to pay the pensions. That is what a guarantee would do. We see adverts all the time in which people are lent money with someone else guaranteeing it, but they do not quite say that the guarantor will pick up the bill if the person concerned does not pay. That principle is true in this case. It ensures that guaranteed pensions, including inflation increases, will always be paid, as long as the Government can pay—and hopefully that will be so for the rest of our lifetimes and many more to come.

It is indeed the case that early projections underestimated how well the scheme would perform. It was not expected to perform as well as it has.

Jonathan Edwards: How many times since the 1994 deal was struck have the Government had to step in with any cash to bankroll the scheme?

Richard Harrington: I think the implication of the hon. Gentleman’s question is that he knows the answer, which I do not, and that it is zero, but I should like to write to him formally, because I do not want to inadvertently mislead anyone. I do not have the information to hand, but if he will bear with me until later today, I shall make sure he gets a letter or email straight away. It is a reasonable question, but, if I may put words into his mouth—although one never should—I think he really means to say that the Government have never been called on to put money in. I think that is a reasonable assumption; the scheme is unlike others, in that respect. However, Governments get a reward, as anyone would, for risk, and just because things are working one way, that does not mean that they always have or always will. I think that most people would accept that. By the way, I heard nothing unreasonable in the speeches that hon. Members made during the debate. There is realism here; it is a question of judgment about what to do with the surplus.

Some hon. Members have argued that the Government are taking money from scheme members. I think the word “robbery” was used, which is a bit inflamed, but I know what it means—that it is something improper. Others say that the pensions would be higher if the Government did not take their share of the surplus. Both those views might be true, but they do not present the full picture, because pensions are paid according to the scheme rules, so that the sums due to scheme members would not change. They could potentially benefit from bigger bonuses if they had a greater share of surpluses, but in that environment the trustees’ investment strategy would be more risk-averse, and returns could be less than they currently are. In any event, would it be fair to ask taxpayers to take all the risk with none of the benefits?

The scheme has been a success, and at least the money is there.

Chris Evans: I just have a simple question: what is the cost to the guarantor, compared with the cost of the surplus? How much do the Government need in the pension fund to provide a guarantee on the pensions? Do we know the figure?

Richard Harrington: The cost to the guarantor is a contingent cost. It could, in theory, be all the money—the billions in the pension fund. That is the only answer
I can give, because, of course, that is what a guarantee is. If one guarantees a loan to a bank, to use the analogy I gave before, it is the whole thing. If the person who has borrowed the money pays back 25% of it, the guarantor pays 75% of it. The principle is exactly the same. However, the scheme in question has been a success, and I would argue, and I think the trustees would agree, that it is the guarantee that made that possible. All the other pension funds—I dealt with quite a few in my previous job—buy very low-risk Government bonds, all the time. They do it because of fear; obviously, they have got to pay money out. With their fiduciary duty they cannot risk it. That is one of the reasons that British pension funds do not invest in infrastructure and similar things as much as we would like. They cannot risk the pensioners’ money, because of the need for returns. A guarantee on all pension funds would transform the whole pensions industry, but of course the Government would then have a contingent liability of I do not know how many billions.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I do not think anyone is arguing that the scheme has not been successful. I am a coalfield MP and have many constituents with long-term health conditions that are the effect of their jobs. My hon. Friends and I are saying that if the scheme has been successful, the success should be shared by the people who benefit from the scheme, and not necessarily by the Government, who have been involved in a technical role, as opposed to being an actual part of the scheme.

Richard Harrington: I hope that the hon. Gentleman understands that the role is more than technical. First, the Government have also contributed a lot to the scheme. Secondly, the guarantee is more than just technical; it is a golden guarantee. That is a good thing—I ask the House please not to think that I am saying it is not, but it is more than just technical. The fact that the guarantee has not been called on may make it look far less important than it is. I want hon. Members to know that it is the trustees’ job to be prudent. They have a fiduciary duty to consider the position. I have not met the trustees, but I imagine that for that reason some of them would err on the side of caution and say, “We can’t distribute the money,” because that is their fiduciary duty. However, the bonuses that are paid are very important. It is one of those things. Current arrangements have certainly allowed the trustees to implement a high-risk investment strategy, but I want hon. Members to know that because of that strategy the typical pensioner receives a pension that is 33% higher in real terms than they would have with a normal Government bond-type of strategy. It is not as if they do not benefit from it. The strategy is backed up by the Government guarantee, which can be called on at any time, on demand, based on the ages of scheme members. We expect it to run for about another 60 years.

I accept the points that hon. Members have brought up, and am happy to meet and go into further detail or discuss new stuff. I am very open to representations. However, I have looked at the matter in the limited time I have had since I have been in the job, compared the scheme with others, tried to assess whether the risk element, the guarantee and compensation are fair in all ways—the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent mentioned that quite a lot of aspects are fair—and I have reached the conclusion that the existing arrangements in this case remain fair to all parties.

Question put and agreed to.

11.27 am

Sitting suspended.
City of Culture 2021: Swansea Bid

[PHIL WILSON in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Swansea’s bid to be City of Culture 2021.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. Today I have the enormous pleasure of bringing forward this Westminster Hall debate. Hon. Members may be asking, “What is a city of culture, and why is it so important?” The UK city of culture is an award given to a city in the UK every four years. That city holds the title for the period of one year. The award was devised to support the sustainable regeneration of cities by positioning culture at the heart of city planning and development. Having previously reached the shortlist for UK city of culture 2017, Swansea is competing to be the city of culture 2021, and has once again been shortlisted. The panel of judges will make their decision this coming Thursday, 7 December, and my hon. Friend the Minister will announce it. We could encourage him to announce it in this debate if he would like to, but he is being coy.

The current holder of the title is Hull, which needs to be congratulated on its excellent year as Britain’s culture capital. The winning city receives the right to hold various prestigious cultural events, as well as encouraging inward investment. While there is no monetary support or prize attached to the title of UK city of culture, Hull has successfully secured £15 million in Government funding, as well as £3 million from Arts Council England and £3 million from the Heritage Lottery Fund. In the first half of its year as UK city of culture, Hull hosted at least 450 events, exhibitions and cultural activities, attracting over 1.4 million visits. It is estimated that Hull’s year as city of culture will lead to a £1 billion boost for its economy and an extra 3,500 jobs.

Swansea could replicate that, and indeed more. Swansea should be the next city of culture not because of unfairness, because we missed out in 2017, or because a city from Wales has never played host to the title; nor is it that Coventry, Paisley, Sunderland or Stoke would not make a worthy city of culture. It is because Swansea deserves it, and we all know how it would allow Swansea to replicate what Hull did. Swansea is in a unique position because it represents a microcosm of Wales as a whole. It has experienced the rise and fall of industries like mining and steel, has a rich industrial history, and is situated at the heart of the Gower Peninsula. It is a city that has been through a lot, and has bounced back stronger than ever. The city has a rich cultural heritage, with a variety of festivals and events that make it a vibrant place to live.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that Swansea deserves the title in its own right, but he is also right to say that Wales deserves it. Here is a nation full of culture, wanting to share it with the rest of the world. I am from north Wales, but I will be supporting this all-Wales bid to have the city of culture. I have come off the fence: my son-in-law is from Coventry and my friends are from Sunderland, but I am sticking with the Welsh bid because we deserve it.

Chris Davies: I could not agree more with the hon. Gentleman. I am also surprised and delighted that he has some friends—that is even better.

The hon. Gentleman leads me on to a good point. Hon. Members may be wondering why the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire is introducing this debate, which some people would expect to benefit south Wales and Swansea constituencies. My northern Radnorshire boundary is 100 miles from the city of Swansea, but the southern tip of my constituency is only 15 miles from the city centre. Like him, I firmly believe that if the bid is successful—I hope it will be—the city of culture status will not only benefit my constituents in the up-and-coming cultural centre of Ystradgynlais in the upper Swansea valley, but will be of benefit right across my constituency and to the whole of Wales to the north, east and west of Swansea. I do not say to the south, because those who know Swansea well will know that they will get their feet wet, and a little bit wetter, if they decide to go south.

Swansea is where the coast meets the city, where the city meets the country, and culture is a natural thread running through it like an artery. I was lucky enough to be born and brought up at the bottom of the Swansea valley, in what was then a very rural area. Now, of course, it has developed as a suburb of Swansea itself. Since my childhood, Swansea has changed considerably, and it continues to change. It is an area that constantly embraces change, hence its status as such a cosmopolitan city today.

Swansea has also had an ever-changing past. In the late 18th and early 19th century it was one of the top seaside resorts in the UK and a true destination for tourists. Its long, sandy beach brought in tourists from near and far, and the continuation of the coastline around the Gower Peninsula rivalled any beauty spot in the country. It was later to become Britain’s first area of outstanding natural beauty. Then came a great challenge to the town, as it was then: tourism or industrialisation?

In 1840, a new identity was forged. New docks were built, foundries were established and Swansea became a key centre of the global copper industry. Wales can lay claim to being the world’s first industrial nation. By the late 19th century, south Wales was a global centre for heavy industry, coal production and maritime trade, and Swansea was central to that. Swansea expanded considerably throughout the great industrial age, bringing great wealth and also great poverty to the area.

The bustling town was then reduced to rubble during the blitz of the second world war. As a major port, with its ammunition-making factories and foundries, Swansea was a massive target. But we are talking about Swansea and its people, and like the proverbial phoenix rising from the ashes, the centre was rebuilt, with new buildings emerging and new life brought into the centre of the still-important city.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate—obviously a timely one, given the week it is in. As I live in and represent part of the city of Londonderry, the first ever UK city of culture in 2013, would he accept my saying that the phoenix rising from the ashes is an appropriate euphemism? One of the things that Swansea, if successful, needs to do is to harness communities across the city and the region of south Wales behind the bid and beyond the bid. There must be legacy projects so that people can say, “That is a tribute to what was achieved as a result of Swansea being successful,” if it is successful on Thursday.
Chris Davies: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. Londonderry is, of course, a prime example, so we listen with interest and take his words very seriously.

Not long after the blitz, change was again on the horizon for Swansea. In the 1970s and 1980s, as the old industrial areas and manufacturing industries closed, vast areas of previously productive commercial and factory sites became obsolete and turned into waste grounds. Swansea was getting ready for yet another period of change. The old Swansea vale, once dominated by the smoke and pollution of heavy industry, now became a magnet for industries of a different type. It became a modern industrial park with high-tech companies, with a progressive out-of-town shopping centre. The city centre still includes a busy shopping core, at the centre of which is the legendary Swansea market, where people can still buy that great Welsh delicacy, laverbread, to go with their cockles and bacon, followed of course by the cultural Welsh cake. There is still a way to go to fully regenerate the city and see Swansea again become the world leader it once was. Being awarded the city of culture prize would be the catalyst for that transformation.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman for that intervention; I am sure the Minister hears the cross-border, cross-country support for Swansea’s bid. I am sure that part of that success spins off. As my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) said, not only Londonderry but the whole of Northern Ireland gained from the city of culture status. The whole of Wales would gain from Swansea’s success.

Chris Davies: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention; I am sure the Minister hears the cross-border, cross-country support for Swansea’s bid. I am sure that will weigh heavily on his decision.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): I make a confession: although I represent Cardiff Central, I am actually a Jack—I was born in Swansea. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing the debate to Westminster Hall. I offer him and all the hon. Members for Wales every best wish for Thursday. I hope they are successful. Not only would that bring benefits to Swansea, but a lot of the people travelling to Swansea to see the city of culture will travel through Cardiff.

Chris Davies: We are honoured by the hon. Lady’s making such a confession in this Chamber. She should be truly praised for it.

We have heard of the history and the geography of Swansea, but what of the culture? Some examples of cultural initiatives run by Swansea include hosting the British Science Festival; the International Dylan Thomas Prize; an artist-led regeneration of the high street; a range of arts and literature festivals; and the work of theatre companies at large. One of Swansea’s most famous sons is, of course, Dylan Thomas, who was born in the city and who based much of his early work on his experience growing up there. Do Not Go Gentle is a new fringe festival in the Uplands area of the city, where Dylan Thomas was born and lived for many years.

The Swansea Grand Theatre is the largest in the region, hosting many west end productions. Several independent theatre companies are also based there. In the summer, outdoor Shakespearean performances are a regular feature at Oystermouth castle—I know the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) is a regular attender of those—and Singleton Park is the venue for a number of parties and concerts, from dance music to the outdoor BBC Proms in the Park.

In addition, Swansea hosts an international jazz festival every summer and an international arts festival in the autumn, where international orchestras and soloists perform in unusual venues, such as empty department stores, as well as Brangwyn Hall—a concert venue in Swansea praised for its acoustics for recitals, orchestral pieces and chamber music alike, not to mention its collection of the Brangwyn paintings. As a young man, prior to becoming a Member of Parliament, I sang there as a chorister. I am sure Opposition Members are terribly sorry they missed that, but I am sure the recordings are available at supermarkets near them.

Standing near Victoria Park on the coast road is the Patti Pavilion, which is used as a venue to stage live music and events and is named after the great Victorian opera singer, Dame Adelina Patti, who built her home at Craig-y-Nos in the upper Swansea valley, at the bottom of my Brecon and Radnorshire constituency. There are also many independent galleries and artist studios, such as the recently expanded Glynn Vivian Art Gallery—a regional partner to the Tate—as well as a large number of live music venues.

The Liberty stadium is home to Wales’s only premier league football club—it is lucky for the hon. Member for Cardiff Central that she made that confession earlier.

Jo Stevens: I would not place too much emphasis on that, bearing in mind that Swansea City are currently bottom of the premier league and Cardiff City are second in the championship.

Chris Davies: Just as we are only partway through the Brexit negotiations, we are only partway through the football season, so let us see what happens.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): And it could not get much worse.

Chris Davies: If the hon. Gentleman means the football, that is a fair comment.

The Liberty stadium has a capacity of 30,000 when used as a music or event venue. There is also the Great Hall and Taliesin Arts Centre, which are owned and managed by Swansea University. The venue hosts a broad programme of events, including cinema screenings, an average of 10 visiting exhibitions per year and a variety of live performances, from dance and drama to jazz and world music.

Of course, there is also the rugby, the football, the churches and chapels and the great food and drink. There are the places of learning—the schools and the colleges and, of course, the University of Swansea, with its outstanding new Jersey Marine campus. Then there is the Welsh language, which is renowned throughout the world. Who could fail to be moved by Welsh song and dance, including by our many Welsh male voice choirs, which lead the world?

Stephen Kinnock: The hon. Gentleman is making a passionate speech. He mentioned the Swansea bay campus. One important thing for the record is that that campus is actually located in the great constituency of Aberavon—I
hope that has been noted by Hansard. On the internet coast proposal, to which we very much hope the Government will give their full support, does he agree that city of culture status would be a fantastic force multiplier for that investment in the Swansea bay city region?

Chris Davies: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman is supportive of that scheme. Of course, Aberavon looks on to Swansea, and anything that benefits Swansea, or, indeed, Aberavon, will be of great benefit to Wales as a whole.

Swansea has produced many great sons and daughters who have turned into cultural icons of today and of yesteryear. Household names include, from broadcasting, Huw Edwards, Ian Hislop and Wynford Vaughan-Thomas, and musicians such as Sir Karl Jenkins, Bonnie Tyler and Dire Straits’ Terry Williams. They also include rugby players and footballers including John and Mel Charles, Dean Saunders, Dan Biggar and Shane Williams, actors including Sir Harry Secombe, Rob Brydon and Catherine Zeta-Jones, and writers such as Dylan Thomas and Iris Gower. From the law—from the upper Chamber in this place—they include Lord Thomas of Cwmgiedd, the former Lord Chief Justice, and from the Church, of course, Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury. Many great politicians have come from Swansea—legends every one of them—but I shall save their modesty and not name anyone directly.

Swansea is now ready for the next chapter in its varied existence. It has the infrastructure in place to provide high-quality cultural services to its communities and to host a world-class product, but co-operation, collaboration and skills development across the sector, accessible to all its diverse communities, have not yet been realised. Swansea can build its reputation as a place of culture, learning and innovation. Although the universities are making great strides on that, many of Swansea’s communities have low confidence and a tendency to look inwards rather than outwards. I strongly believe that becoming UK city of culture could help to overcome that in ways that would be otherwise unachievable. I am confident not only that Swansea can deliver an exemplary course, R owan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury. Many great politicians have come from Swansea—legends every one of them—but I shall save their modesty and not name anyone directly.

I am so proud to call Swansea my home. It is the city that gave birth to Mal Pope, Bonnie Tyler, Russell T. Davies of Doctor Who fame, Harry Secombe, Mervyn Davies—known affectionately as “Merv the Swerve”—and Kev Johns, a senior local Swansea celebrity. As the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire mentioned, Dylan Thomas referred to Swansea as:

“An ugly, lovely town...crawling, sprawling...by the side of a long and splendid curving shore.”

I am afraid I have to disagree with Dylan on that small point. Swansea was recently named the most beautiful UK city. It is hard to think of a more beautiful destination. We can admire the glorious coastline at Rhossili bay, voted Wales’s best beach in 2017, get lost in Singleton Park or gaze down at all of Swansea in its splendour from Kilvey hill in the proposed Skyline cable cars.

It is estimated that approximately 5.7 million people will visit Swansea if it is awarded city of culture status, spending more than £431 million while they are there. That will be a welcome boost for the small businesses of Swansea and the surrounding region—businesses we all supporting. Thousands of paid and voluntary roles will be created, including as artists, performers and apprentices and in tourism and event management. City of culture status may come with a one-year timeframe, but this is not a one-off arts project; it is a driver and accelerator of significant investment and a means to create more resilient and connected communities.

There will also be a programme for young people who are not in employment, education or training, as well as the disabled, those on low incomes and other social groups who need greater support to achieve their potential, by gaining work and volunteering experience. That will include 40 programmes run for and by older people, to address isolation and loneliness, communication, dementia and intergenerational support, alongside engaging some 2,000 students to volunteer or take part in cultural events or programmes that help them feel supported.

Culture is not simply about the arts. This will reinforce the culture of community integration and the well-being of the 685,000 people living in the Swansea bay city region. The unifying theme of Swansea’s city of culture bid is “Turning Tides—A City Revealed”. Would it not be fantastic to finally see the Government commit to Swansea bay tidal lagoon before 2021?

I represent the east side of Swansea—a constituency that I love and that no one could convince me to move out of at any cost. In that region of Swansea, families are more likely to have a lower income. The team behind our city of culture bid has recognised that and will implement measures to ensure that Swansea residents do not miss out based on geographical location. Residents
of Swansea East will be supported through ticketing, transport and family learning activities in their communities and in the city overall. 

The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is shining the spotlight on each shortlisted city this week, starting with Coventry last Friday and Sunderland today. I see it as fate that Swansea is being celebrated on Thursday, the day that the overall winner of city of culture 2021 is announced. I will be watching “The One Show” avidly with bated breath this Thursday—parliamentary business permitting—to hear the city of culture 2021 announced as Swansea. I have every faith in Swansea’s ability to deliver a winning bid, and I for one cannot wait to share my ugly, lovely town with you all.

2.53 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Chris Davies) on securing the debate. Having been brought up in Swansea East and educated at Morriston Comprehensive, he knows the area well. 

Swansea and the Gower is the hidden gem of Wales and the United Kingdom and deserves far more attention than it currently gets. My constituency of Gower would benefit greatly from the extra publicity, with tourism being a major employer. Gower, located within the Swansea region, is one of the most beautiful and picturesque areas in the world. In fact, the Gower peninsula was the first place in the UK to be named an area of outstanding natural beauty.

Gower has so much to offer as part of this city deal. It has four blue flag beaches—Bracelet bay, Langland, Caswell and Port Eynon—and five beaches with the green coast award for natural and unspoiled environment, including the little-known Pwll Du cove. Going around the peninsula, Rhossili to the north was voted the UK’s best beach, as my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) said, as well as the third-best beach in Europe and the ninth-best beach in the world, with rare birds and wildlife and the sight of shipwrecks along the beautiful coastline. There are so many beaches and picturesque areas of coastline that there is even an app for people to navigate their way around the peninsula.

Sport is a way of life. The surfing and water sport beaches of Llangennith and Caswell are a great attraction for thrill seekers and beginners, with the option of lessons from the brilliant Gower surf school. Next summer, you may even catch me on a paddle board going around the Mumbles. Mumbles is always a popular attraction for tourists and has so much to offer. The Swansea bay rider, a land train operating between Blackpill and Mumbles, offers a fun way to travel and enjoy the bay, with great sights such as Mumbles pier, boutique shops and—thanks to Italian families such as my own in the area—the option of ice cream from Joe’s and Verdi’s. It also hosts the Royal National Lifeboat Institution lifeboat station, which is a vital service for ensuring safety across the coast.

Apart from the obvious highlights of the peninsula, my constituency has a lot more to offer, with heritage centres in Clydach and Gower, the latter offering a 12th-century working water mill. Loughor town hall is undergoing a major redevelopment, and glorious woodland walks can be found in Coed Bach Park in Pontarddulais, which has green flag certification.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): My hon. Friend is speaking with real passion for the constituency she represents. She is a true champion of the people and communities of the Gower. Just up the road is the equally wonderful constituency of Ogmore, which is full of rolling hills and valleys and lots of walking opportunities. Does she agree that part of the success of the bid, if it is granted, will be the wider cultural aspects and recreational and physical activities on offer in constituencies such as mine, as well as Aberavon and so on, for people who are visiting?

Tonia Antoniazzi: That is a very important point to highlight. Walking and exercise are very important and form the recreational part of the bid. What happens in Swansea will then filter down into nearby constituencies.

We also have some amazing food, from cockles and oysters from Oystermouth, to Salt Marsh lamb from north Gower, delicious Gower Cottage brownies and Gwyr gin, which my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East has still to taste. We are unique in what Swansea can offer. We have the local Gower and Mumbles breweries—I believe my predecessor even brought some of those breweries’ products to the bar. I hope that Members will be ordering their Gower Christmas trees. A tree from the Gower Christmas tree farm in Three Crosses is proudly displayed in Downing Street this year.

However, there is room for strengthening our offer to be city of culture for 2021. The Swansea bay tidal lagoon would be a pioneering piece of infrastructure for renewable energy, harnessing the power of the tides. The lagoon will be a world first and will shine a light on Swansea with an inspiring new infrastructure, offshore visitor centre, arts programme, sculpture park and more. The deal is vital for the city, and I hope it is considered as well as the bid.

My constituency has so much to offer to secure this bid and deserves recognition as one of the cultural hubs of south Wales. Many parts of Gower are hidden gems just waiting to be discovered. Swansea’s being awarded the city of culture will put Gower on the map and bring much-needed investment, along with the £1.3 billion city deal. This bid is supported by many Members across the House and across the country, including my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), who has stated how Hull’s recognition as city of culture has had such a positive impact, not only financially, and is fully behind the bid for Swansea city of culture 2021.

2.58 pm

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a great pleasure to follow my friends, my hon. Friends the Members for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) and for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), and of course the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Chris Davies). I am so glad we have come together as a team across Wales, having agreed at a reception that I convened to collectively put in this bid. Everyone in the room is so strongly in support of a successful bid for Wales and in particular for Swansea and the Swansea bay city region.
We have heard today a glowing history of where Swansea has come from, including its industrial history in relation to copper—it was known as Copperopolis—and coal, and the problems that we faced during the blitz. We were brought through industrial turmoil and change to where we are today, confronting a new era of challenges with Brexit and regional poverty and deprivation in the context of Europe. Of course, Swansea has a very rich history of culture, which has been echoed in the speeches today, in particular by my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East, and a rich natural beauty.

My own family have been in Swansea for five generations, and during that time we have seen a continuance of unity, creativity and resilience, alongside change. It is a changing community, but we still have a lasting identity. As has been said, we are the only Welsh city that has been put forward for the title, and we feel a great responsibility in holding the mantle for Wales: the language, the songs, the poetry and the nationhood. We feel proud to be coming forward.

Many of the famous stars of Swansea have been mentioned. In the context of the Swansea bay city region overall, we think of people such as Anthony Hopkins, Michael Sheen, Catherine Zeta-Jones and Katherine Jenkins, and of course Dylan Thomas is our most famous son, an international brand name that is known across the world. Indeed, Swansea itself is a global brand name thanks to our footballing success. There is a connectivity between the poetry and culture and the international branding. UK city of culture is also a very strong brand and would be another very important way of bringing vital inward investment to communities that are in many senses struggling.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gower mentioned our world-class coastline. In fact, Gower was the first area to be named an area of outstanding natural beauty in Britain, and it remains as she described.

Swansea is a community of communities, interlinked and interwoven, working together for the common good. That is one reason that Swansea’s theme for the bid is “Every Wave has a Voice”. The proposition is basically that we are all individuals, but working collectively we have a louder voice, and we will pull together, in harmony, for the good of all, particularly in difficult times.

We have a lot going for us. The Glynn Vivian Art Gallery has just been refurbished. The Taliesin Arts Centre puts on stuff. There is also the Grand Theatre. Of course, we have the Liberty stadium, which hosts great sporting events but is also a music venue. With the university, both the Bay campus in Aberavon and the Singleton Park campus, there is an opportunity to host cultural events. With our venues and communications, we have the means to be a first-class city of culture. We have the National Waterfront Museum, which is also a great place to host art.

**Jo Stevens:** My hon. Friend mentioned music. UK Music’s most recent figures show that music tourism results in a direct spend in the whole of Wales of £95 million a year. Much of that will be spent in Swansea. Does he agree that our passion for music in Wales and in Swansea is an integral part of the city of culture bid?

**Geraint Davies:** Yes. I am very pleased to hear that intervention. Music is at the heart of all Welsh people, across Wales, and in Swansea it is a vital part of our identity. I mentioned the Liberty stadium, where there have been various big concerts. Music is a vital part of our attraction for tourists. Again, we need to invest in the cultural infrastructure to amplify the voices of the local people and give them opportunities in culture and the arts.

The Minister will know from his own experience and office how important tourism and culture are to exports and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) has just said, how important music is. The music industry relies more these days on audiences rather than direct sales of records, as they used to be culled, or even downloads. I am referring to live music, amplified, and we certainly want to be given opportunities to host that.

The Welsh language has of course been raised. We are very proud of our Welsh language, and the Government are supportive of it. Again, we would want to use the city of culture title as a way of amplifying and sharing more widely the diversity of the languages within the UK. We are moving forward into slightly unknown territory because of globalisation, and people are also looking back at their own identity. This is an important moment for Welsh history, and we hope that we can take this crown.

In Swansea, we face real challenges in relation to poverty. People living within a mile of one another might have a difference in average life expectancy of seven years. The Swansea bay city region of west Wales is regarded as one of the poorest parts of Europe. That is why we are beneficiaries of convergence funding, which we will no longer attract. It has been mentioned that in the case of Hull, something like £1 billion was generated through the magnet of tourism attractions and activity. We have a lot to offer, whether it is the football, the Ospreys, the music, the language or just the general friendliness and warmth of the people of Swansea. There is a community of restaurants and there are opportunities to go around the more than 100-year-old city centre market, whose fresh products go through our restaurants. That provides a new offering to visitors.

My hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East mentioned the lagoon. We have great support locally for our lagoon. Basically, the project involves green electricity from tidal energy, and we continue to press the Government on that. Again, we hope that, if successful—it was given the thumbs-up by the Hendry review—it would itself be a tourist attraction that would help us rise to the challenge of being the UK city of culture.

We have hopes for the electrification of the railways, alongside a Swansea bay city metro, which together would reduce the journey time from Cardiff to Swansea from an hour to half an hour, making the opportunities for visitors much greater. Of course, if we were the city of culture, there would be mutual benefit. The business case for electrification and the Swansea metro has been cast into doubt by the Government. They have been asking about the journey times and the level of demand: “What is the business case?” We are now saying that if we combine the half-hour reduction in journey time with the city deal that is coming forward and the extra investment for new jobs, and if on top of that we had the city of culture title, there would be an overwhelming case for electrification. The reduced journey time would multiply through, as my hon. Friend the Member for
[Geraint Davies]

Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) said, and give extra bonuses to an area that has been hit by difficult times.

We can look at the changes in social security. That might involve universal credit or a trimming down of public expenditure. It might be the bedroom tax. All these things have a disproportionate impact on Swansea bay and Swansea. The community wants the tools to succeed, and it is very much a cultural city, which would look to take full advantage of what could be a £1 billion investment.

We hope to attract more and more international visitors as well. The expansion of the university has enabled many more international friendships to emerge. We hope to use the university investment alongside the cultural investment to attract more tourism income, which would have a halo effect right across Wales and the UK.

I will not go on much longer, Mr Wilson; I know that other hon. Members are keen to speak. I will just say that the voices that we hear from Swansea are rich in terms of diversity—there are various communities and people have different nationalities, of course—and art, music and industry. The keenness to combine the cultural contribution and the economic contribution to provide a stronger, fairer future for Swansea is embedded in the proposition that “Every Wave has a Voice”. As the city of culture, we would help to ensure that those voices were heard.

Finally, as has been mentioned, Londonderry in Northern Ireland had great success as a city of culture; in Scotland, Glasgow is the European city of culture; and most recently, in England, Hull has been a city of culture, so we feel it is time for Wales to receive the crown. Who could be a more fitting successor than Swansea, the queen of Welsh hearts?

3.10 pm

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): Why am I speaking today about Swansea when I represent a constituency some 25 miles along the M4? I cannot propose to speak with the same passion as my hon. Friends the Members for Swansea West (Geraint Davies), for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) and for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi). When we hear them speak, it is obviously a case of “Cut them and they bleed Swansea”. It is important to have representatives who feel so passionately about the constituencies they represent. I want to thank them on the record for everything that they do for the city they are so passionate about.

My experience of Swansea is limited to betting shops. I worked in Jack Brown bookmakers for several years. I remember the fantastic villages of Cwmbrwla, Gors and Townhill, and I still feel the fear running up my spine—no, I am joking. We are talking about the city of culture today, and I want to talk about my experience of living and growing up in Wales for the past 40 years of my life. I was born in the mid-70s and brought up in the Rhondda in south Wales. We were made to believe that people did not care about us. We never heard anybody ever mention Wales. Or if they did mention Wales, it was always in a negative sense.

I remember, many years ago, the national lottery coming to the Rhondda Heritage Park. We all crowded down there because it was a national event. We were all there, and there was a male voice choir dressed up as miners, with black marks on their faces, as though they had just come up from underground. We were disappointed, because that was not our image of Wales. The innovation, the cleverness of our communities was not coming forward in the national image. People had an image of us in soup kitchens and on the breadlines, only interested in going down the pub and getting drunk or whatever, because our industry had gone away. That is why it is so important that Swansea wins the bid to be city of culture.

We have an image problem still. There are people who do not visit Wales who believe that we are in some sort of post-industrial meltdown. I say let them come to cities such as Cardiff or Swansea to see how the Champions League, the premier football event, was hosted in Cardiff. Let them see how many tourists that brought in and how many people were shocked by our culture.

When I was a kid, I did not have many Welsh icons because there were none on the television. I remember being moved by my great hero, Richard Burton, who was born in Pontrhydyfen, just down the road from Swansea, as he quoted, “Do not go gentle into that good night”—

“This rage against the dying of the light.”

That is what we must do when we are advocating Swansea as a city of culture. We are raging against that negative image of Wales. That is why it is vital we have the city of culture, but it is also important for Swansea itself.

For a city that has an unemployment rate of 5.3%—higher than the rest of the UK—the city of culture would be a massive confidence boost. It would mean that Wales is front and centre. When I look at previous bids, I am concerned that Swansea is the only flagbearer for Wales. If the city of culture goes to England once again, what message would that send to the regions of Great Britain? The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about how Londonderry, or Derry City, benefited from being a city of culture. Wales must have the same thing. I am not denigrating Stoke, Coventry or Sunderland; I am just saying that Wales needs this more than ever. We need to be in the shop window.

As has been mentioned, we have great stars such as Catherine Zeta-Jones. Dylan Thomas has already been mentioned. When I think of Swansea, I also think of “Twin Town”—I think they are making a sequel—and we remember how they denigrated it and how somebody twisted Dylan Thomas’s words about an ugly, beautiful town and called it something else. I remember Dougray Scott standing outside the train station and saying Swansea looks like “a pretty”—bleep—“shitty city”.

Oops, I just said it! [Laughter.] I’m going to be on the news for that one, aren’t I? I am sorry, Mr Wilson; that was a direct quote from a film, but that is how people saw Swansea, and Swansea needs to change that image.

Swansea has academic institutions. My old university, formerly Trinity College, Carmarthen, now Trinity Saint David. University of Wales, has a strong engineering section. We also have the Richard Burton archives in Swansea. We have museums, and heritage plays an important part, but much of our heritage has been lost. Swansea was called the copper capital of the world at one point, but as the heavy industry went away, the
heritage was taken away. The museum warehouse has the sailboats and vintage vehicles, but much of our heritage went away. We have only the culture now, which is what we need to put over, I do not know whether the Minister has ever visited Swansea, but it is a unique city. It has a seafront. It has wintry nights, and I know the Swansea Members here will say it is one of the most beautiful cities when it is lit up by the wintry sunlight as well.

I support the bid, not only because I know how beautiful Swansea city is and how beautiful the people are. Above all, I support it because if Swansea wins the bid to be the city of culture, Wales will win as well. We should get behind the bid and support it. Regeneration is important in post-industrial cities. Phil Redmond, the producer of “Brookside” and “Grange Hill”, comes from Liverpool and he will know how important regeneration is. I hope he will look favourably on the bid. I really hope we have some good news on Thursday.

3.16 pm

Glyn Davies (Montgomeryshire) (Con): Thank you for calling me to speak, Mr Wilson. It was a late decision to contribute to the debate, but I want to join in the enthusiasm in the Chamber and for Swansea to be chosen as the city of culture.

Montgomeryshire is a long way away from Swansea, but in my view it is Wales’s turn. It does not matter whether people are from Montgomeryshire or Ynys Môn—the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) has left the Chamber—the selection of Swansea would be a great achievement for Wales, and would benefit the whole of Wales. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Chris Davies) on securing the debate. He explained his support for Swansea with his constituency 15 miles away. Although I represent Montgomeryshire, when I was a Member of the National Assembly for Wales I represented Mid and West Wales, also 15 miles away from the centre of Swansea, and it included Pembrokeshire and Carmarthenshire. My main point is that I want to support Swansea’s bid.

The big issue in terms of fairness across Britain is the need to move investment and wealth away from the south-east corner and away from London. It is moving successfully to Cardiff, but we need to move it further west. That is the only way we will develop Pembrokeshire and Carmarthenshire. Swansea is a key staging post and developing the city of Swansea is absolutely key to the whole of west Wales. The same applies in mid Wales. The key to mid Wales might be Birmingham. In north Wales it might be Manchester or Liverpool. We have to draw the investment and economic activity west, which is what investment in Swansea does.

We have talked about the historical icons of Swansea. I have always been fanatical about sport and still am. I watch the Ospreys, but I do not watch Swansea at the moment because I do not get the chance—I desperately hope they manage to retain their premiership status. It is important to us and the derbies next year with Cardiff will be absolutely terrific. My greatest hero of all came from Swansea: John Charles. I met him and I am old enough to remember him playing. He was amazing. He was the greatest forward in Europe, and the greatest centre-half in Europe. I think £65,000 was paid for him to go off to play in Italy, which was unheard-of money then. He was a precursor of Gareth Bale and more, but he was a back as well as a forward. He was a wonderful man. When I met him it was one of the greatest privileges. The BBC invited me to a dinner that he was at. He was elderly and failing in health, but for someone so great he had incredible humility. I looked on him as the greatest sportsman I knew, and he came from Swansea.

I wish the best of luck to the bid. I desperately hope that it wins, for the sake of Swansea and Wales.

Geraint Davies: I thank the hon. Gentleman for supporting the Swansea bid. Apart from anything else, there are only 3 million people living in the whole of Wales, and he made the point that we are very connected, nationally. The Swansea bid, as he said, will shift the focus of investment from Cardiff, which is on the English side of Wales, westward through Ceredigion. The nation has only 70% of average gross value added. We can make the most of the investment, and in Swansea we will make sure that it delivers for the whole of Wales.

Glyn Davies: I completely agree. Let us all give our full backing to Swansea, and let it be known that we shall be most displeased if it is not selected.

3.21 pm

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Chris Davies) on securing the debate and on his excellent speech in support of Swansea for the city of culture. He told us that his constituency stretches down very close to the boundary of Swansea in the town of Ystradgynlais, and reminded us of the city’s history, including, in particular, the fact that Swansea was among the cities that suffered heavily during the blitz in the second world war. Often that is not widely recalled; Swansea really suffered at that time.

We had a wonderful contribution from my very good friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), who is a passionate campaigner on many subjects—a successful one, who I am sure hopes to be successful on this occasion. Her description of Swansea made it sound rather like the garden of Eden.

Carolyn Harris: It is.

Kevin Brennan: I hope she is not suggesting that original sin was invented there, but her description certainly conveyed the beauty of the city and its environs very well.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) lives in a beautiful constituency at the edge of Swansea. I know it is beautiful because my sister, Colleen, lives there. I recommend anyone who has never visited the Gower to do so, because it is one of the most beautiful places in Wales, Britain or, in fact, the world. My hon. Friend’s talents know no bounds. I knew already that she had won nine caps for rugby, for Wales, and I knew that she had recently won the House of Commons darts competition; but I did not realise she was such an avid paddle boarder. We all look forward to coming down to Swansea to watch her undertake that pastime. She mentioned Joe’s ice cream: other ice creams are available—but not many, if any, are as good as Joe’s, and she was right to highlight that wonderful Swansea
institution. She rightly challenged the Government about the tidal lagoon project. Although the Minister is a man of great influence and power, we do not expect him to make the announcement today in the debate—unless he is feeling so inclined—but I encourage him to encourage his colleagues to get on with it. We heard about the importance of Swansea’s industrial heritage, but Swansea has a wonderful future, and is the best place in Britain to build a tidal lagoon. I hope that the Government will announce their support for the scheme in the near future.

My hon. Friend the Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) mentioned the Welsh language and its importance to the city of Swansea and to the city of culture bid. Perhaps we should mention its Welsh name, Abertawe, as the bid is a bilingual one, and it is right that even here in the UK Parliament, where we use English, we should use that name.

My hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) spoke passionately about the influence and impact that Swansea’s becoming city of culture could have on the image of Wales. He is right to emphasise that issue. When I joined Cardiff Council in 1991 we set up a body called Cardiff Marketing and we did some studies of what image of Cardiff and Wales people had. Many people living in London thought Cardiff was about six hours away by train and full of coal mines—an utterly inaccurate picture. Swansea is, by car, a mere 45 minutes beyond Cardiff, and the journey would be much shorter by rail if the Government would get on with the electrification of the line beyond Cardiff to Swansea. That would have the kind of impact that my hon. Friend was calling for, if the title of city of culture were to be used to promote economic development and a better image. He quoted Dylan Thomas, and actually corrected his grammar to “Do not go gently”, whereas Thomas did not use the adverb, and said “Do not go gentle” in the poem. I congratulate my hon. Friend on his superior grammar, despite his slight slip of the tongue later in his remarks.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies)—I want to call him my hon. Friend; I have known him for many years—who rightly mentioned John Charles. There would have been a big lacuna in the debate if he had not. The “gentle giant” was probably the greatest ever Welsh sportsman—and there have been many great Welsh sportspeople, including my hon. Friend the Member for Gower. John Charles was probably the greatest, and if it had not been for his being kicked off the park during the 1958 World cup, he would have won the cup.

I want to make a few of my own remarks about Swansea and the city of culture bid. The scheme was set up in 2009 by the Labour Government. They established a UK city of culture competition, with the aim of making creativity and culture part of the answer in difficult economic times, rather than a luxury for the small number of people who could afford them. I think it has been a successful programme, and I am pleased that the current Government are carrying on with it. I commend them for doing so. It allows cities and groups of towns to show what culture means to them, instead of being told what it is through a top-down check list. The city and its residents are rightly at the heart of the process. As we have heard, in Swansea’s case it is not just the city but a whole nation that is behind the bid.

Since 2009, the programme has had a tremendously positive impact in Derry/Londonderry, as we have heard, and currently in Hull. When Derry/Londonderry was city of culture, it became clear how much the city had changed since the time of the troubles, and it was an important way of changing its image. Hull residents have told us that since it was given city of culture status, people are even more ready than they were to gather together as a community, and that they feel even prouder of their city than they were before it won the prize. In both cases, becoming the UK city of culture has drawn attention to and encouraged parts of cities that were already flourishing, but that were not always seen beyond their own borders, in other parts of the United Kingdom.

It is clear, then, why a number of cities are bidding for the title in 2021. All the shortlisted contenders are strong. The House will understand why, speaking from the Front Bench, I cannot back a particular city’s bid, even though I am a Welsh MP. I think that I have never disagreed with my neighbour and very good hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens). She made her own interjection in the debate—I will say no more than that.

It is clear that Swansea is an excellent candidate to be city of culture. We have heard a lot about the poet Dylan Thomas who, as well as his poetry, is known for his colourful personality. I remember learning “The Hunchback in the Park” at school:

“A solitary mister
Propped between trees and water
From the opening of the garden lock
That lets the trees and water enter
Until the Sunday sombre bell at dark”.

As a lover of poetry, I think it would be wonderful for Swansea if it could win the title of city of culture, and Dylan Thomas could be even more widely recognised. Scotland has its Burns night, and I always think that we should have a Dylan Thomas night in Wales to recognise our greatest poet in the English language.

Geraint Davies: Does my hon. Friend agree that if Swansea were to win the city of culture 2021, people would be able to plan visits to Swansea, based around Dylan Thomas and other cultural icons? High Speed 2 will reduce the journey time from London to Manchester by half, down to one hour and eight minutes, and at the same time we are pressing to reduce the journey time to Cardiff and Swansea through electrification. Alongside fears that there will be a displacement of investment towards the HS2 corridor instead of to south Wales, does my hon. Friend agree that winning the title of city of culture would be a major influence in buoying up the local economy across south Wales and Wales, at a time of uncertainty?

Kevin Brennan: My hon. Friend will not be surprised to know that I agree with that.

We have already heard the famous quote by Dylan Thomas about Swansea as an “ugly, lovely town”. Well, he was right, it is lovely, and perhaps once it was ugly.
Now, however, it is a beautiful city, not an “ugly, lovely town”, and today people can visit wonderful cultural institutions in Swansea, such as the Dylan Thomas Centre that we heard about earlier, which opened in 2014 to commemorate the centenary of his birth. They can also visit 5 Cwmdonkin Drive, and that is a short walk from Cwmdonkin park—the subject of the poem that I recited earlier—where there is a blue plaque and a permanent exhibition to commemorate him.

It is not only Welsh writers who have an association with Swansea. We have not yet heard mention of Kingsley Amis, who spent many years as a lecturer at University College, Swansea. He wrote “Lucky Jim” and “That Uncertain Feeling”—that was later made into a film with Peter Sellers called “Only Two Can Play”—while living in the Uplands in Swansea. It is a town with a real literary and cultural background. My very good friend, the artist Paul Edwards, is from Swansea. It is full of theatres, castles and galleries and has a vibrant cultural life.

As we have heard, Swansea University goes from strength to strength. I recently visited the new campus at Jersey Marine, and the Morgan Academy, which was set up in memory of the late, great Rhodri Morgan, who was my predecessor as MP for Cardiff West and the former First Minister of Wales. Given all that, it is clear that Swansea’s cultural life is truly worth celebrating, and its bid is very strong.

I would like briefly to mention the European capital of culture, because I think that relates to today’s debate. I have asked the Government for a list of meetings that were held in 2017 on that issue, given the recent announcement by the European Commission that Britain’s bid for European capital of culture will be withdrawn. Unfortunately, in answer to my parliamentary question, the Government referred me to a public list of meetings that goes only until June this year, and I think that we need a more serious response to explain what happened with the European city of culture. I hope that the Minister will be able to make a passing reference to that, and say a bit more about why the UK Government, and the bidding cities, which were spending money up until the last moment on their bids, were so blindsided by the announcement that the European capital of culture competition would not be going forward in the UK. I hope that the Minister will confirm—I am sure he will—that the competition for UK capital of culture will be going forward, and that the bidding cities have not been wasting their time and money.

We have heard a lot about the kind of impact that being city of culture can have. It does not magically create culture where it does not exist, but it celebrates and encourages great work that is already being done but is often under-publicised. As such, Swansea is already a city of culture, regardless of whether the bid is successful. I hope that the UK city of culture competition continues to thrive, and champions the cultural activities that make cities and towns across the UK such wonderful places that we can be proud of.

3.35 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (John Glen): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Chris Davies) on securing this important debate on Swansea’s bid to become the UK’s city of culture 2021. As always, I acknowledge the contributions of all Members who have spoken so passionately this afternoon. The full spirit of the UK city of culture has been on show, and a great depth of knowledge has been shown about Swansea and all its cultural attributes. This has been a very worthwhile debate as we get into the final stages of this competition.

The House has already heard similar debates on the four other towns and cities shortlisted to be the next holders of the UK city of culture title—Coventry, Paisley, Stoke and Sunderland—so this debate will be the last in the present series. The hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) managed, with typical skill, to include in the debate the issues of the tidal lagoon and electrification. I will not be able to respond to those points from my position in DDCMS, but I acknowledge his concerns and will take them back to my colleagues.

Before I begin the substance of my speech, I wish to say a few words about the European capital of culture programme, which has featured in the headlines in recent days. I am sure that many Members of the House were, like me, shocked and dismayed by the position taken by the European Commission two weeks ago, which is that the UK cannot host the title in 2023. That went against everything that had happened up until that point, and we had no expectation that it would occur. Five UK cities have, like Swansea, invested huge amounts of time, resource and commitment in developing their bids, only for the Commission—at a point when the bids had already been submitted—to sweep the rug from underneath them. I know that Swansea, together with the cultural sector right across Europe, has expressed its solidarity with the five UK cities of Belfast, Dundee, Leeds, Milton Keynes and Nottingham. We are in urgent discussions with the European Commission about its action, and in positive talks with the five cities themselves—I met representatives from them all last week, and I hope to update the House more substantively in the near future.

The UK city of culture programme grew out of the success of Liverpool’s tenure as European capital of culture in 2008. As Minister for the arts, I see this programme as one of our nation’s Crown jewels. The winning area must build a high-quality arts and cultural programme of national significance that reaches a wide variety of audiences and participants. As we have seen with Hull, winning the city of culture title must be a catalyst to regenerate and transform an area. Cities must demonstrate that they are ready and able to grasp the opportunity provided by the title. I was moved by the speech by the hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans), who spoke about how things were when he was growing up, and the cultural gap that was perceived to exist. Providing an opportunity for transformation is exactly the purpose of this programme, and that case will be made by all the bidding cities.

This year, 11 places from across the UK set out their ambitions to become the next city of culture. Following a recommendation from the independent panel, chaired by Phil Redmond, I agreed a shortlist of five in July. It is hugely gratifying to know that those areas that regrettably did not make the shortlist—Hereford, Perth, Portsmouth, St Davids, Warrington and Wells—are all continuing with their ambitions. They see their bids as the beginning of something, not the end. I sincerely believe that that
will be the case for all those that are unsuccessful this week. As has been referred to, Swansea bay was shortlisted for the UK city of culture in 2013 when it narrowly lost out to Hull, and it is clear that, while ultimately unsuccessful, the bid was an important step in the city’s cultural development.

Now, for the shortlisted towns and cities, decision day is fast approaching. We have about 51 hours to go, and as we speak my officials and the independent panel are en route to Hull, where they will receive presentations from all five areas before making their final recommendation. As the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) said, Swansea will present its bid on Thursday morning, and I will announce the winner later the same day. Some might say that is an unusually quick and efficient process for Government.

Geraint Davies: I know that the Minister will be looking, as the panel will be, at the past, present and future cultural offering for Swansea and other places, but will he be looking very carefully at relative deprivation? I say that because, as he knows, the average UK gross income is £19,106 but the average in Wales is £16,341 and in Swansea, £15,604. Weekly, that is £550 for the UK and less than £500 for Swansea. Can he confirm that he will be looking at the impact on deprivation and the inclusivity of these bids?

John Glen: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. The independent panel will be looking at a whole variety of factors. It will be looking at what advantages, and the extent of those advantages, the different bids are likely to accrue to their given cities, and the economic advantage will be one of the elements that they will look at very carefully.

As with the other debates, I thought it would be helpful to set out the benefits of the city of culture. Speaking of Hull, it is helpful to reflect in this debate on how much is to be gained from winning the UK city of culture title. Hull City Council estimates that the local economy has benefited from £3.3 billion in total investment since being awarded the title in 2013. Seven out of 10 Hull residents say that the UK city of culture status have already undertaken more than 300,000 volunteer hours. City of culture status has helped to restore local pride, and who can forget Hull City’s fans singing, “You’re only here for the culture!” at a premier league match earlier this year? Ironically, I think they were playing Swansea at the time.

Jo Stevens: Although this is just an anecdote, does the Minister think it represents Hull? I remember going to a Cardiff City match against Hull where the Hull fans had a big banner saying, “Ghetto of excellence.” I think they can lose the “ghetto” bit now, after city of culture.

John Glen: The hon. Lady makes a fine point. Hull has seen brilliant engagement with the arts.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Will the Minister give way on that point?

John Glen: Let me make a little progress and then I will come back to the hon. Gentleman. I wonder what he has to say.

Hull has seen brilliant engagement with the arts, with nine out of 10 residents attending or experiencing at least one cultural event in the first three months of the year—it might be higher now as we get to the end. That is more than double the number engaging in such activities before the city’s successful bid.

Gavin Newlands: I was going to have a watching brief in this debate and hold my tongue because there have been many great speeches on why Swansea should be the city of culture. Based on the football element, the Minister will be aware that the local football side St Mirren has renamed its stadium the Paisley 2021 stadium in support of the bid. That highlights the huge support it has across Paisley, Renfrewshire and indeed Scotland.

John Glen: The hon. Gentleman, as expected and quite rightly so, makes another plea on behalf of his home bidding city of Paisley. I have received so many representations and passionate requests on behalf of the bidding cities. We do not have long to wait, but I do acknowledge the quality of the bids across all five cities, and it is very sad that only one can win this week.

I pay tribute to the many national institutions, from the BBC to the Government Art Collection, that have also contributed to the success in Hull. We have seen genuine collaboration across the whole of the arts and cultural sector.

I now come to the substance of this afternoon’s debate: Swansea’s bid to become the UK city of culture 2021. One of the enormous pleasures of my job is learning about the history and culture of towns and cities across the UK, and I try to visit as many of them as I can. I have learned that Swansea has an incredible 32 miles of stunning coastline, that Swansea Museum is Wales’s oldest public museum, and that Welsh National Opera originated in Swansea. I was clearly already familiar with the “ugly, lovely town” described by Dylan Thomas and now a thriving city, as the hon. Member for Cardiff West pointed out.

Swansea is rightly proud of its most famous son and I know that the Dylan Thomas Centre is one of the city’s great attractions, with ever-increasing participation figures. Back in 2013, the Heritage Lottery Fund awarded nearly £940,000 for a three-year project that centred on the celebrations of the centenary of the birth of Dylan Thomas. A range of organisations across Wales participated in the celebrations, including the National Library of Wales, which showcased an archive of Dylan Thomas material in a major exhibition. Most importantly, the Dylan Thomas Centre has the lasting legacy of a permanent exhibition, “Love the Words”, which opened on 27 October 2014—Dylan’s 100th birthday. This interactive exhibition tells the story of the work, life and cultural context of Dylan Thomas, and includes a learning space, activities for children and a temporary exhibition area.

I acknowledge other important cultural institutions, including the National Waterfront Museum, the Glynn Vivian Art Gallery, Plantasia and the Grand Theatre. In fact, VisitBritain has included the Glynn Vivian Art Gallery’s hosting of the “Leonardo da Vinci: Ten Drawings from the Royal Collection” exhibition as a key reason why international tourists should visit Britain in
2017. There are also many independent galleries and artists’ studios, digital workspaces and live music venues. Wales’s first dedicated space built purely for use by the creative industries is located in Swansea’s Urban Village development in the city centre, and both the University of Wales Trinity Saint David and Swansea University offer a range of graduate and undergraduate courses in the creative sector, encouraging new and exciting start-ups and performing arts companies to thrive.

Geraint Davies: I am enjoying the Minister’s speech, but I just want to point out to him that we have two engines in the universities there that are producing enormous numbers of qualified people in both the arts and the sciences. One of the things we lack is the retention of those people in the city. Does he agree that city of culture status would enable them to stay in their home and build the economy, with visitors and tourism helping to fuel that fire?

John Glen: Throughout this debate the hon. Gentleman has made a number of passionate interventions showing an encyclopaedic knowledge of Swansea, as anyone would expect, and he is absolutely right on this point. The effect of cultural investment in creating a stickiness and a magnet for businesses to want to continue to invest and for employees to want to stay is really important. That is a significant feature of what we have seen in Hull: more investment and people wanting to stay there. Whichever city is successful later this week, we hope that that will be replicated in four years’ time.

Swansea has its own international arts festival and an international jazz festival, which I believe is now the largest in Wales. The Heritage Lottery Fund has provided almost £25 million for projects in Swansea, including the aforementioned Dylan Thomas exhibition, a number of HLF Young Roots projects and the All Saints Church restoration. As we have heard, following its city deal, Swansea is also going through a period of major physical transformation, investing in the largest regeneration programme the city has seen since World War Two. I am very heartened to know that culture, creativity and this city of culture bid are right at the heart of these plans.

From all we have heard this afternoon, it is abundantly clear that Swansea, in common with the other shortlisted areas, has the heritage, vision, infrastructure and cultural leadership to be the next city of culture. Whichever city wins, I am sure it will be a very worthy winner. and will continue the journey that began in Derry/Londonderry in 2013 and has continued so spectacularly in Hull this year.

In conclusion, I sincerely wish the city of Swansea the best of luck in presenting its bid to the panel this week. As I said, in just over 51 hours, I shall announce the winner on the recommendation of the independent panel, chaired so well by Phil Redmond.

Chris Davies: I thank the Minister for his conclusion. It is clear that he is not the judge alone; he is the conduit to deliver the judges’ address and result on Thursday, but any influence that he can exert over them would be gratefully received by those of us in Swansea. We have clearly heard today that this is not just a city bid but a national bid. We have had support from Anglesey to Aberavon, covering a vast area—a rural area and a city area—and adjacent cities and counties across Wales. This is a very important bid to the people of Wales, and certainly to the city of Swansea.

I thank all my colleagues from all parts of the House for the cross-party support for Swansea’s city of culture bid. I am grateful to have so much support and to hear the various views and bids for Swansea to be given city of culture status. We have heard a lot about Swansea’s background and history—it was how I began my opening speech—but the city of culture bid is all about the future. It could offer so much to the people of Swansea. From youngsters going through school to the children who have not even been born yet, all can benefit from Swansea being named the city of culture for 2021. This is very important to us. As I said during my initial address, I was not pushing and supporting the bid from a feeling of unfairness because we had missed out in the past. Like all my colleagues, I support it because Swansea truly deserves to be the 2021 city of culture. Let us all hope on Thursday for the right result to be announced—that Swansea will be that city of culture in 2021.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered Swansea’s bid to be City of Culture 2021.

3.52 pm

Sitting suspended.
Banking Sector: Fraudulent Accounts

[Mr Philip Hollobone in the Chair]

4 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered fraudulent accounts and the banking sector.

It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, for the first time that I can recall. I hope we have a full and useful debate.

More than two years ago, a constituent approached me about having been the victim of banking fraud. I called this debate because I have been unable to get the spider’s web of organisations with responsibility for making our banking system safe to act in the best interests of my constituent and bring to justice the perpetrators of a fraud that has left him £13,500 poorer.

The British banking system is one of the most advanced in the world, with an apparent cornucopia of legislation to give customers a comfort blanket of trust. My constituent fell victim to a simple fraud, paying £13,500 into the British high street bank account of an individual who had undertaken to deliver services that my constituent never received.

My constituent, under the impression that this country’s extensive money laundering regulations meant that bank accounts could be opened only by legitimate individuals with established UK addresses, reported the crime to the police when it became clear that the services that he paid for would not be provided, and that he had been the subject of a fraud. He was told by the police that available information about the person who opened the bank account was insufficient for them to proceed with their inquiries, and that the bank account involved had been opened with a provisional driving licence. Following cursory police investigations, it became immediately clear that the individual concerned had never lived at the address supplied to the bank when the account was opened. Indeed, the address given was incomplete.

To this day, Lloyds bank insists that it made no errors in allowing the opening of the bank account used to defraud my constituent, even though the police have confirmed that the suspect has never resided at the address given to Lloyds. Furthermore, for more than a year afterward, the Met police did not pursue inquiries into the crime because they thought, erroneously, that Lloyds would not give them the account opening information that they needed to pursue more thoroughly the criminal involved. In fact, that information had already been given to another police force in Bedfordshire.

By the time the error was established, the case was a year old and lines of inquiry were cold.

I have spent two years being handed from one organisation to another in the attempt to have this case properly investigated. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister can explain how Lloyds can be held to account for the situation. Is he content that a bank account can be opened without a valid postal address for the applicant? Is that not in breach of money laundering regulations? I am not a lawyer, but I have read the regulations, and it would seem so.

The police thought that Lloyds would not divulge the application details, yet they found a year on that that was not the case. Why is there no established protocol for banks and police to follow in fraud cases such as this? Which organisation is responsible for ensuring that Lloyds complied with money laundering regulations when, as a result of the bank’s actions, there is insufficient information for the police to investigate possible criminal money laundering breaches? Is it perhaps time to review banks’ responsibilities when it comes to fraud, and bring them more in line with the credit card industry?

Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend on securing this debate. She mentions the credit card industry. She will be aware that the protections afforded to people using credit cards are far greater than those afforded to people using debit cards or making online transfers. Does she agree that those protections should be extended to forms of banking other than just credit cards?

Mrs Miller: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to bring up that inconsistency in how financial consumer protection works. Many people would be taken aback to understand how little protection they might have on a bank account money transfer when, if they simply used credit cards, they would be far more protected. The difference seems reflective of the situation in the past when credit cards were set up, when they might have been seen as a much riskier proposition. The evidence that I am giving suggests that banks are also a bit of a risky proposition when it comes to fraud. He makes an excellent point.

The cost of fraud across payment cards, remote banking and cheques to banking customers and shareholders was more than £768 million last year, involving almost 2 million separate cases. Given the scale of the problem, it is little wonder that the police are not always in a position to act.

For the past two years, I have done all that I can to get justice for my constituent, only to be passed around a bewildering array of organisations. Lloyds bank says that it made no error, yet the police say that the individual who opened the account never lived at the account opening address. The ombudsman says that it cannot investigate how an account was opened, the Financial Conduct Authority tells me that it does not investigate individual cases and Action Fraud and the National Fraud Intelligence Bureau do not investigate crime, it appears, but pass it to the relevant police force. Who exactly ensures that money laundering regulations are followed, and that banks allow new accounts to be opened only with proper evidence of identity and residence?

In this case, the police are clear: their investigation shows that the person who opened the account never resided at the address. I feel trapped in a Catch-22 situation. Lloyds allowed inaccurate information to be used to open an account, but because the identity evidence that I am giving suggests that banks are also a bit of a risky proposition when it comes to fraud, and the payments industry can spot credit card fraud using algorithms, surely we can expect banks to properly check the ID of their customers.
Financial Fraud Action UK, an industry body, is calling for the payments industry to be more transparent about the scale of the problem and to take a common approach to how frauds are handled. Which?, the consumer magazine, is also clear that banks should shoulder more responsibility for money lost due to fraud, but they need to be incentivised to do so and to focus more on detecting and preventing fraud.

Failure to check account opening details correctly is a serious criminal offence, with a criminal penalty to match. The banking code is clear that documents must prove ID and address. The police say that the reason their investigation is not ongoing is that the person involved never lived at that address, yet no one appears to be willing to hold Lloyds to account, perhaps because the evidence available does not meet the criminal standard of proof.

Will the Minister explain why my constituent should be satisfied? Surely Lloyds has breached its own anti-fraud requirements. Lloyds closed the account because of fraud. In correspondence with me, the bank has admitted that a provisional driving licence was used, but will not confirm what other information was used and why it failed to check the address, given that it was incomplete. Lloyds allowed a fraudulent account to be opened and there appears to be a reasonable case for saying that that is a breach of money laundering regulations. Will the Minister investigate, or at least tell me who might investigate? I have tried for two years, but I simply cannot find out who that might be.

Some cases similar to my constituent’s have received compensatory payments from other high street banks because of the investigative journalism of somebody at The Daily Telegraph. I find it a misery that the Government do not take the same view. When we rely on journalists’ intrepid work to ensure that our banking system is fair and accountable.

In February 2016, the Home Secretary, now the Prime Minister, established a fraud taskforce. Can the Minister update the House on what has been done through that taskforce to stop banks allowing accounts to be opened fraudulently? My constituent, who quite rightly wants to protect his privacy, needs to have justice, but he also wants his experience to lead to changes that will help to stop this situation happening to many other people.

4.11 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Stephen Barclay): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I pay tribute to the tenacity with which my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) has championed the cause of her constituent, who has clearly suffered from the traumatic case that she rightly raises with the House today. She outlined that she has been working on this case for some time, including exchanging correspondence with Treasury Ministers last year. I welcome the opportunity to update her on the work of the taskforce that was set up, as she correctly said, by the Prime Minister and on developments with the payment systems regulator and others.

To be clear, banks must take action to prevent accounts being used for criminal purposes. The Financial Conduct Authority is responsible for ensuring that firms meet their legal and regulatory obligations. As my right hon. Friend is aware, the FCA is an independent body. That is vital to its role; its credibility, authority and value would be undermined if it were possible for the Government to simply intervene in its decision making.

I will discuss the positive steps that the regulators and industry are taking shortly, but I will first touch on the issue at the core of my right hon. Friend’s concerns. Bank accounts used for fraud and other criminal purposes are a serious concern of the Government, the FCA and the industry, particularly given that authorised push payment scams—the type of fraud to which she refers—are the second biggest payment fraud after card fraud. The FCA’s rules expressly require banks to have systems and controls to counter the risk that they are misused for the purpose of financial crime, including money laundering and fraud.

The money laundering regulations require banks to verify the identity of their customer and to assess the purpose and intended nature of the business relationship when a customer opens a bank account. A key part of the regulations is a requirement to carry out customer due diligence, which was another of my right hon. Friend’s core concerns. Customer due diligence measures mean verifying the customer’s identity on the basis of information or documents obtained from a reliable source that is independent of the customer. As I understand it, Lloyds maintains that when it opened the account, it was applying the “industry-wide acceptable documentation”, but I know that my right hon. Friend has concerns in that regard.

Since my appointment, I have encouraged the industry to consider the use of new technologies where they are as effective or more effective than existing practices. The increasing digitisation of financial services and products means that it is important that customers can prove who they are online. Firms should develop robust tools to ensure that they know who they are dealing with. In essence, there is scope through an electronic footprint to enhance the standard of customer due diligence in the future.

Where a bank assesses greater risk, it may take additional measures, including seeking additional documentation and checking the customer’s source of wealth or funds. Banks must conduct ongoing monitoring, including scrutiny of the transactions undertaken throughout the course of the relationship, to ensure consistency with the customer’s business and risk profile. Banks must also undertake reviews of customer records so that information obtained for the purpose of due diligence is kept up to date.

The FCA is responsible for supervising banks’ compliance with the money laundering regulations and for ensuring that they maintain systems and controls to prevent financial crime more generally. If the FCA finds evidence that a regulated firm has not undertaken due diligence checks, that firm would be in breach of the money laundering regulations. That addresses one of my right hon. Friend’s core questions about who is liable and who enforces the money laundering regulations: it is the FCA’s responsibility to ensure that firms have systems and controls in place to avoid money laundering.

Mrs Miller: The point that I made was that when I wrote to the FCA, it said that it did not take on individual cases. The Minister is right to say that it looks at systems and processes, but not at individual
cases. I hope he might be able to refer me to who does look at individual cases, because, frankly, I have not worked that out in two years—but he is much cleverer than I am.

Stephen Barclay: I will come to some of the steps that are being taken to mitigate that. The key point is whether the standards applied met the requirements of the money laundering regulations or whether there was a loophole. I know that my right hon. Friend has corresponded with the FCA on that point.

As I say, if the FCA finds evidence that a firm has not undertaken its due diligence checks, that firm would be in breach of the money laundering regulations. Where a bank falls short of its obligations, the FCA has shown that it is capable of taking action through multi-million pound fines for two of the largest banks in recent years. At the same time, the FCA must ensure that its supervisory regime is proportionate and efficient and that its unintended consequences are minimised.

I am sure my right hon. Friend will appreciate and recognise that there is a balance to be struck in terms of the level of scrutiny required for due diligence checks. Recently, the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) raised the issue that, at the other end of the spectrum, refugees often experience concerns about their ability to open a bank account because banks ask for levels of documentation that give them the impression that they are being prevented from opening accounts. So the balance is between a proportionate level of due diligence checks and a level that does not stop refugees, for example, being able to legally open a bank account.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke also raised the issue of the Payment Systems Regulator, which is leading the work on this type of scam where someone is tricked into making a payment to the wrong account or into paying the fraudster directly. The Government have made it clear that more should be done to stop that happening and to mitigate the harm caused when it does happen. I am pleased to say that progress is being made. The PSR’s ongoing programme of work with industry aims to reduce the risk of the scams occurring and to reduce the damage that they cause. Existing initiatives include better data sharing between banks, a function to enable customers to be sure who they are transferring money to and best practice standards for the reporting of scams. The PSR has outlined milestones for those initiatives to ensure that the momentum is kept up.

Although the PSR accepts that not all scams can be prevented, it has taken a decisive step to align incentives and to reduce harm. It has proposed a contingent reimbursement scheme in which banks would reimburse victims when the banks have not met the required best practice standards, provided that the victims had taken appropriate care when making the payment. That speaks to a further point that my right hon. Friend made about compensation. The PSR’s consultation on that scheme is open until 12 January 2018. The consultation gives a clear sign to consumers that the regulator is on their side, and the PSR will respond to it in due course.

Banks and the FCA must do all they can to prevent fraudulent bank accounts from being opened in the first place, but fraud is a much wider problem. The joint fraud taskforce, as my right hon. Friend mentioned, was set up by the Prime Minister when she was Home Secretary in 2016 as a partnership between Government, law enforcement and the financial sector. The taskforce is working in innovative ways to deliver a more effective response to fraud, including by investing £3.1 million, with industry, in a campaign to improve the ability of people and businesses to protect themselves from fraud; working to understand how even more funds can be returned to fraud victims; pursuing a cross-industry strategic plan on so-called “card not present” fraud; and considering what makes victims susceptible to fraud and how to reduce vulnerability.

The Home Office has asked Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services to conduct a review of police response to fraud at a local level, which my right hon. Friend also raised as a concern. The review will assess how local forces deal with demand, assess risk and provide victim care services and will examine the role of the City of London police as the national lead force for fraud.

I thank my right hon. Friend again for raising these issues. The Government recognise the terrible impact of this type of fraud on its victims. There are already strict rules that banks must comply with when opening new accounts, and the independent FCA is responsible for ensuring they do so. The PSR and the industry are doing robust work to tackle all types of fraud, working with the Government’s joint fraud taskforce. The Government will continue to drive appropriate action on these issues, which are so important to all of us in this House.

Mrs Miller: I sense that the Minister is drawing to a close. His remarks have addressed the generalities of the banking system, which I understand are hugely important to the regulator and the Government, but may I press him again on particular instances in which individual constituents such as mine have been let down? It is very difficult to see what recourse they have when banks fail to abide by their own codes of practices and rules, leaving them poorer for it.

Stephen Barclay: As I understand it, my right hon. Friend draws a distinction between systemic responsibility for the rules of a firm as a whole and responsibility for individual cases, but if I have mischaracterised that distinction, I am happy to write to her. My understanding is that responsibility for firm-wide systems and controls falls to the FCA, but specific one-off cases of fraud are in the police’s remit, so it is for the police to look at individual cases. I am very happy to follow up that point in further discussions.

Mrs Miller: May I detain the Minister a moment longer? The problem is that if a bank fails to gather information about a perpetrator of a crime who has opened a bank account, it leaves police unable to follow the perpetrator. Ultimately, it is very difficult for the police to find the criminals if information on their addresses and names has not been collected in the first place.

Stephen Barclay: I am acutely aware of the problem that my right hon. Friend raises. Whether the correct information was collected in her constituent’s case is an
issue of fact: I understand from Lloyds that it was, but my right hon. Friend may care to differ. Her point about the remit of the police illustrates the reason the Prime Minister asked Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary when she was Home Secretary to review the role of the police in addressing these issues.

All hon. Members recognise how traumatic these cases are. Prevention is better than cure, which is why the industry is taking measures through the PSR. Where fraud occurs, we need to look at how the responsibility of the banks aligns with potential compensation. The PSR consultation is open until mid-January, and I am sure my right hon. Friend will want to contribute to it. We need to look at the balance of responsibilities between the FCA as regulator and banks in individual cases.

I hope my right hon. Friend will be reassured to hear that, partly as a consequence of her tenacity in raising her constituent’s case, the Prime Minister has announced a review of police response and a suite of measures on the FCA, on standards and on the role of the PSR, to ensure that others do not suffer as my right hon. Friend’s constituent has.

	Question put and agreed to.

4.25 pm

Sitting suspended.
HIV infection will receive sustained antiretroviral therapy, know their HIV status, 90% of all people with diagnosed suppressed. That means that we are therefore still a long antiretroviral treatment and 38% of people are virally income countries—we have only just seen major trials but access is a problem, particularly in low and middle-
little about pre-exposure prophylaxis. PrEP is a game-
is also vital globally. Later in the debate we will talk a working hard to get the message through that undetectable
of whom do not know their HIV status.
36.7 million people worldwide living with HIV, 14.5 million of whom do not know their HIV status.

Stigma is still a major barrier to accessing treatment. Even here in the UK, the Terrence Higgins Trust is working hard to get the message through that undetectable equals untransmittable—the U=U campaign—and that is also vital globally. Later in the debate we will talk a little about pre-exposure prophylaxis. PrEP is a game-changing drug that could reverse aspects of the epidemic, but access is a problem, particularly in low and middle-income countries—we have only just seen major trials and major availability in this country. Some 17 million people, or 46% of people living with HIV, are now on antiretroviral treatment and 38% of people are virally suppressed. That means that we are therefore still a long way from reaching the UNAIDS 90-90-90 targets, which are that, by 2020, 90% of all people living with HIV will know their HIV status, 90% of all people with diagnosed HIV infection will receive sustained antiretroviral therapy, and 90% of all people receiving antiretroviral therapy will have viral suppression. UNAIDS has reported that progress on the decline in new infections has, unfortunately, slowed down and that we are now off track for achieving those internationally agreed targets. In 2016, there were 1.8 million new infections worldwide; the target is to reach just 500,000 by 2020.

Although overall new infections among adults have declined since 2010, progress has varied according to region. For example, in eastern and central Europe new infection rates have increased by an alarming 60%, and we have heard very worrying news from Russia, which is currently conducting an inquiry into the withdrawal of aid from middle-income countries and its impact on women and girls living with HIV, which we hope will shine some light on this crucial issue. Multilateral aid, such as that given through the global fund, is vital, but it is not the only answer. The UK has a significant presence, both in its personnel and its ministerial involvement at international conferences and, crucially, at country level. A presence on the ground through bilateral aid is also crucial, and that is something we have recently discussed with the global fund and other organisations. Those bodies require partners on the ground with whom they can work, and we have a proud track record on that, which we do not want to see decline.

Young people are also particularly vulnerable, because they are often denied the information and freedom to make decisions about their sexual health and do not know how to protect themselves from HIV. Therefore, along with women we need to ensure that young people are at the heart of the UK Government's HIV prevention and treatment strategies globally. Will the Minister tell us what steps he is taking to ensure that young people are at the heart of the agenda? Will he look at DFID's youth agenda and include specific reference to young people living with HIV and AIDS?

I mentioned earlier that there has been an alarming increase in new HIV infections in eastern and central Europe. One of the key problems—aside from those issues I mentioned about stigma and the lack of community in Russia and many parts of the former Soviet Union. Figures are merely statistics, however, and unless we look more closely at what they mean for people living in the poorest countries, and some middle-income countries, we do not see the real impact on lives and the devastating effect that HIV and AIDS can still have.

Although here in the UK AIDS-related deaths have been significantly reduced since the terrible days of the 1980s and early-1990s, worldwide, millions of people are still dying from AIDS-related causes. I would like to praise the leadership that DFID has shown on HIV over many years, under many Governments, particularly its recent contribution to the global fund. I was delighted to meet the fund's interim executive director a few weeks ago here in Parliament, with members of relevant APPGs, and I congratulate Peter Sands on his recent appointment to that role.

HIV is treatable and should not result in death, but there are a number of reasons why it still does, and I will try to cover them. HIV is still the leading cause of death for women of reproductive age. According to UNAIDS data, young women aged between 15 and 24 are at particularly high risk of HIV infection, accounting for 20% of new HIV infections among adults globally in 2015. Although the UK Government are clearly committed to improving women's rights and opportunities there is some concern that HIV is being overlooked in that area, given that there is, for example, no mention of HIV in the recent update of the strategic vision for girls and women. Will the Minister comment on that, and agree that, given the importance of HIV as the leading cause of death for women of reproductive age, he will consider adding in a specific reference to HIV when the strategy is next updated?

The all-party parliamentary group on HIV and AIDS is currently conducting an inquiry into the withdrawal of aid from middle-income countries and its impact on women and girls living with HIV, which we hope will shine some light on this crucial issue. Multilateral aid, such as that given through the global fund, is vital, but it is not the only answer. The UK has a significant presence, both in its personnel and its ministerial involvement at international conferences and, crucially, at country level. A presence on the ground through bilateral aid is also crucial, and that is something we have recently discussed with the global fund and other organisations. Those bodies require partners on the ground with whom they can work, and we have a proud track record on that, which we do not want to see decline.

Youth are also particularly vulnerable, because they are often denied the information and freedom to make decisions about their sexual health and do not know how to protect themselves from HIV. Therefore, along with women we need to ensure that young people are at the heart of the UK Government's HIV prevention and treatment strategies globally. Will the Minister tell us what steps he is taking to ensure that young people are at the heart of the agenda? Will he look at DFID's youth agenda and include specific reference to young people living with HIV and AIDS?
commitment to education and treatment—is that some of
the middle-income countries, particularly in eastern
Europe and the former Soviet Union, are falling through
funding gaps. As a result, we have seen gaps pulled out, which
Governments are unable or unwilling to provide funding
for HIV prevention and treatment services.

DFID’s support of the Robert Carr civil society
Networks Fund is crucial in providing the necessary
funding for civil society groups in those harder-to-reach
places with harder-to-reach populations. We heard about
the importance of the work funded by that network in
the event with STOPAIDS last week. UNAIDS’s latest
report, which was released on World AIDS Day, highlights
that outside of eastern and southern Africa, HIV prevalence
is highest among men, particularly within key populations,
and that they are the least likely to seek treatment.
UNAIDS warns that that is a blind spot within the
current HIV response. DFID has given £5 million over
the past three years to the RCNF. Will the Minister tell
the House whether his Department plans to increase
that amount to make further progress towards the
90-90-90 target?

While we have seen a significant increase for multilateral
funding and the global fund, others are not doing their bit. What discussions has the Minister had with other
donors about their responsibilities and their funding for
the global fund and bilateral funding? STOPAIDS released
an important report looking at UK bilateral funding,
which had some worrying statistics. While I absolutely
welcomed the funding we have seen for the global fund,
the RCNF and other things, we have worries in the
sector that some of our bilateral funding is perhaps not
what it should be. Will the Minister say a little about
that and the steps we can take to increase the transparency
of DFID’s funding in this area?

DFID is currently using a policy marker to estimate
its HIV spend, which essentially means that a programme
identified as having a significant HIV outcome is able to
automatically attribute 50% of its budget to HIV tracking.
The problem with that is that it risks overestimating our
contribution in those areas. That might seem like a
technical issue, but I am sure the Minister will agree
that we need to know how our money is getting results
and where it is being used. Currently, there is no way of
accurately telling. Will he look at that issue and how we
can improve our transparency on that spending?

Another crucial area is access to medicines. In our
2014 report, we highlighted some of the barriers to
accessing HIV medicines. Sadly, three years later we are
still grappling with some of the same concerns. While
the cost of first-line treatment has come down from a
high of £7,500 to £75 a person a year, thanks to generic
competition and huge civil society pressure, third-line
treatment remains prohibitively expensive for people
living in low and middle-income countries, and there
are still too few paediatric formulations available. Unfortunately, that is one of the downsides of the
current system. We have close, frank and regular dialogue
with those in the pharmaceutical industry, but we have
to find ways of working with the sector to improve
access issues.

While many great initiatives already exist—the
International Partnership for Microbicides, the International
AIDS Vaccine Initiative and various other public-private
partnerships, the Medicines Patent Pool, multilaterals
such as Unitaid and the Clinton Health Access Initiative
and others—there is still more we could be doing to
improve the situation. For example, we should ensure
that where public funds are used, there are sufficient
conditions in place to safeguard public return on research
and development investment. Will the Minister say a
little about the work his Department is doing to ensure
that we have access to medicines for all those who need
it? It is important that we continue to invest in vaccines.
We need to invest in the prevention technologies that
will ultimately be the way to secure a sustainable end to
the epidemic.

Those are some of the challenges we face with HIV
internationally, but before I conclude I want to reflect
briefly on some of the domestic issues. The issues of
stigma, discrimination and access to treatment for vulnerable
groups apply across the board. I was astounded to read
the other day that a YouGov survey found that one in
five Britons would be uncomfortable wearing the red
ribbon for World AIDS Day because people might
think that they have HIV. There should be absolutely no
stigma surrounding HIV status. We all need to do our
part to ensure that we stamp out that stigma for once
and all. I publicly had an HIV test at the Terrence
Higgins Trust centre in Cardiff last week. I was proud
to share that on social media and encourage others to
take a test during national testing week. I thank all
Members, including those here today, who have worn
their ribbons in the past few weeks and who have been
along to take tests.

I pay particular tribute to His Royal Highness Prince
Harry and his new fiancée Meghan Markle for the part
they have played by making one of their first public
engagements going along to a THT centre. His Royal
Highness took a test last year, and I understand that
that increased testing rates significantly. As an all-party
group, we were delighted to meet him recently and
discuss his passion for and commitment to the cause. I
am sure we all applaud that work.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North)
(Lab): Before my hon. Friend finishes his excellent and
timely speech, I commend him on securing the debate
and apologise that I am not wearing my red ribbon,
although I am wearing my sustainable development
goal badge. “It ain’t over”—those are the words of the
pledge we have all made to recommit our energies to
ending AIDS/HIV by 2030, but we will not achieve that
goal unless we are committed politically and financially
to ensuring that it becomes a reality.

Stephen Doughty: I absolutely agree with my hon.
Friend. “It ain’t over” was the central message from
STOPAIDS when we met last week. We need to get that
message out there loud and clear. The challenge has not
gone away, although we have seen much progress.

On the domestic front, I want to mention two issues.
I would be grateful if the Minister reflected on them
and perhaps discussed them with his colleagues in the
Department of Health. First, we have seen the
fragmentation of services. The all-party group published
a report last year called “The HIV Puzzle”. It looked at
some of the fragmentation of services in England since
the Health and Social Care Act 2012 and some of the
resulting challenges for people in accessing treatment
and prevention services locally. Some worrying statistics
are coming out about treatment availability in some
Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): This is an hour-long debate that will finish at 5.30 pm. Six Members are seeking to speak. I am obliged to call the first of the Front-Bench spokesmen at seven minutes past 5. There are guideline limits of five minutes for the Scottish National party, five minutes for Her Majesty’s Opposition and 10 minutes for the Minister, with three minutes for Mr Doughty to sum up the debate at the end.

Mr Doughty is generously declining to have the full three minutes, but he will perhaps take a minute or so. I am afraid there will have to be a time limit of three minutes so that everyone has a chance to contribute. The next speaker will be Ross Thomson.

Mr Doughty: I welcome the trial of pre-exposure prophylaxis or PrEP in England and the announcement in Wales and Scotland, in England PrEP will be available to only 10,000 people over three years. What will happen when we reach 10,000? Will we suddenly stop making PrEP available? Surely that cannot be the case. The many organisations that campaign for PrEP want to see it available to all those who need it.

I conclude by thanking all the Members who have come here today to support the debate on World AIDS Day 2017. We will never forget the millions of lives lost to AIDS, and we will continue to fight in their name for HIV and AIDS to become a thing of the past.

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate, and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on securing it. Earlier this year, on 20 April, I led a debate in the Chamber on tackling infectious diseases. It was a wide-ranging and well-attended debate, with interest from across the House. A lot has happened since then, however—not least the snap election, and the appointment of a new Minister covering health at the Department for International Development and a new Secretary of State.

In three minutes, I will try to cover two or three areas very quickly. I am the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on global tuberculosis. Hon. Members may not be aware of this, but in recent years TB overtook AIDS as the world’s leading infectious killer. What is worse is that TB is the leading killer of people living with HIV/AIDS. Together the diseases form a lethal combination, each speeding the other’s progress. In 2016, TB was responsible for almost 40% of all AIDS-related deaths.

Next year, the UN will convene its first ever high-level meeting on TB. I urge the Minister to ensure that DFID engages fully in that process, and presses for global agreement and investments to end the deadly duo. Last year, I welcomed the Government’s increased commitment to the global fund. Its investments do great things; it has been at the forefront of tackling co-infection and is on course to save another 8 million lives over the next couple of years.

When DFID’s HIV strategy lapsed in 2015, it was not renewed. Without a strategy to guide DFID’s work, it is little wonder that there are gaps in its financial and programmatic commitments. Ministers have dismissed calls to renew DFID’s strategy, but I urge the new Minister to reconsider, so that we can have a strategy in operation in the coming years.

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Mr Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on such a great presentation of the issues.


[Stephen Doughty]

areas. Secondly, while we welcome the trial of pre-exposure prophylaxis in England and the announcement in Wales and Scotland, in England PrEP will be available to only 10,000 people over three years. What will happen when we reach 10,000? Will we suddenly stop making PrEP available? Surely that cannot be the case. The many organisations that campaign for PrEP want to see it available to all those who need it.

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Mr Doughty is generously declining to have the full three minutes, but he will perhaps take a minute or so. I am afraid there will have to be a time limit of three minutes so that everyone has a chance to contribute. The next speaker will be Ross Thomson.

4.47 pm

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) for securing this important debate. Last Friday was World AIDS Day, and I was pleased that the day was commemorated by MPs across the House donning the red ribbon. It is a symbol of solidarity with the almost 37 million people globally living with HIV/AIDS and the millions who die every single year from HIV-related illnesses. It is one of the most destructive pandemics that has not yet been eradicated.

Since the 1980s we have come a long way in tackling HIV and AIDS, as well as the stigma surrounding the issue. We are so close to getting to zero new infections, an achievement of which we would all be proud. However, stigma still stands in the way of reaching that target. We must tackle discrimination around HIV wherever it occurs—ignorance and isolation limit the opportunities for those with a diagnosis.

Across Scotland and the United Kingdom, buildings were lit up in red to mark World AIDS Day. In Aberdeen, the granite from Marischal College to King’s College glowed red to remind us of the work that is still left to do. In Scotland, more than 5,000 people are living with HIV. That figure has doubled since 2001. The figure is far too high and is growing far too fast. Knowledge is a powerful tool, and information liberates us from our current ignorance. Education is vital to progress and is key to tackling the growing figure. Some 79% of young people believe that pupils should have access to up-to-date and effective sexual health education, yet three in five pupils in Scotland do not remember receiving any HIV information in school. With two young people diagnosed with HIV every month, that is not acceptable.

Globally, we are moving in the right direction, as in 2016 there were 300,000 fewer cases than in 2015. Breakthroughs in scientific research have meant that an HIV diagnosis is not a death sentence, and that it does not have to be passed on. Those with a diagnosis are our colleagues, friends, partners, children and neighbours. They lead lives that in the 1980s would not have been thought possible. Such people are a living testament to how far we have come.

We all have a part to play in eliminating HIV-related stigma. Eliminating AIDS and having an AIDS-free generation is within our grasp, if we continue to reach for the goals that we have set. We have fought AIDS and now must work to eradicate the pandemic.

4.50 pm

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate, and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on securing it. Earlier this year, on 20 April, I led a debate in the Chamber on tackling infectious diseases. It was a wide-ranging and well-attended debate, with interest from across the House. A lot has happened since then, however—not least the snap election, and the appointment of a new Minister covering health at the Department for International Development and a new Secretary of State.

In three minutes, I will try to cover two or three areas very quickly. I am the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on global tuberculosis. Hon. Members may not be aware of this, but in recent years TB overtook AIDS as the world’s leading infectious killer. What is worse is that TB is the leading killer of people living with HIV/AIDS. Together the diseases form a lethal combination, each speeding the other’s progress. In 2016, TB was responsible for almost 40% of all AIDS-related deaths.

Next year, the UN will convene its first ever high-level meeting on TB. I urge the Minister to ensure that DFID engages fully in that process, and presses for global agreement and investments to end the deadly duo. Last year, I welcomed the Government’s increased commitment to the global fund. Its investments do great things; it has been at the forefront of tackling co-infection and is on course to save another 8 million lives over the next couple of years.

When DFID’s HIV strategy lapsed in 2015, it was not renewed. Without a strategy to guide DFID’s work, it is little wonder that there are gaps in its financial and programmatic commitments. Ministers have dismissed calls to renew DFID’s strategy, but I urge the new Minister to reconsider, so that we can have a strategy in operation in the coming years.

Will the Minister outline what his Department is doing to ensure that we develop the tools we need to end the epidemic? On balance, much progress has been made, but as the STOP AIDS campaign says, “It ain’t over” yet. There are many challenges, but there are also opportunities, and we must seize them.

4.53 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on such a great presentation of the issues.
Every year, I run a dinner for my association and invite an MP from this place to come across for it. It is an occasion to raise a bit of money, but the great thing is that half of the monies raised through that dinner go to Eden Mission, which has a charitable orphanage in Swaziland. Swaziland is a little country with about the same population as Northern Ireland. The people, like my constituents, are warm, friendly and ever so helpful, but unlike my constituents, almost one in every two of them has AIDS. The epidemic has resulted in a lost generation, with grandparents raising their grandchildren on a massive scale, as the middle generation is dying of AIDS. Every year, the Eden church in my constituency brings over a choir of children, and this year managed to raise some £50,000 for that orphanage and for other projects that Eden Mission has in Africa as well. Those children are still children, but some of them, through no fault of their own, are ill with AIDS. With a healthy diet and medication, AIDS is no longer the death sentence it once was, as the hon. Gentleman said very clearly when introducing the debate.

It is always nice for the children to come and sing in my office, in return for the small part I play in fundraising to allow them access to life-saving drugs. I am proud to wear a red ribbon today as a homage to that lovely choir and the many people throughout the globe who have AIDS. I am very proud to wear that ribbon, like other hon. Members here today. However, looking at home, more people are now diagnosed with AIDS in Northern Ireland than ever before. The figures came out just last week—more than 1,050 people. We are above the norm in the United Kingdom, and that is just the over-50s. Again, just to put a marker down, we look across to Swaziland, other African countries and elsewhere, but perhaps we also have to look at what is happening a wee bit closer to home.

We also have to look at how we deal with this matter in schools. We probably all had to go through an uncomfortable sex education class at some stage; it has to be done. Let us understand it better, and do it better in schools. We should preach the importance of safe sex. Furthermore, as all of us in this Chamber know, the spread of HIV/AIDS is not simply down to unsafe sex. It can happen through blood transfusions or something as simple but deadly as someone not knowing that they have AIDS and therefore not being careful about the spread of bloods from cuts. It has been transmitted to those who are hooked on drugs and share needles. Babies are at risk of getting it from their parent, yet there are measures that can be taken during delivery to help mitigate the risks if the condition is known about, so there have been massive advances.

It is always very hard for us to fit all the things we want to say into just three minutes, but I conclude with this: we cannot and must not pigeon hole this disease, but equally we cannot and must not ignore the uncomfortable truths that may prevent more people from unknowingly getting HIV. We must address the issue head on, and do what we can to stop the spread and to educate people of all ages, races and genders.

4.56 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) not only on introducing the debate, but on his speech and his ongoing work with the all-party parliamentary group.

It is extraordinary to believe that with political will we could achieve the sustainable development goal of ending the AIDS epidemic, to all intents and purposes, by 2030. As others have said, however, and as the recent campaign has highlighted, “It ain’t over”. Success is a long way from being a certainty. Indeed, to get close we will all need to do our game, as it seems that the 2020 interim target is likely to be missed. As the statistics cited by the hon. Gentleman illustrate, the scale of the progress gives us grounds for optimism, but the scale of the remaining challenge is formidable.

Some key obstacles are pretty predictable in the context of international development. One is, of course, money, with the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS predicting that a $7 billion annual funding gap needs to be filled by 2020 if we are to get back on course. In fact, we seem to be going in the wrong direction. A second obstacle, which other hon. Members have highlighted, is attitudes. Epidemics will flourish where fear and prejudice stop people receiving the services that they need to live healthy and productive lives. Horrifyingly, there remain HIV criminalisation laws in no fewer than 72 countries.

Now more than ever we need a detailed strategy, and careful and generous funding—so where is the UK in all this? Undoubtedly, the UK has an immensely strong track record, and has been a world leader, particularly through its founding role and contributions to the global fund. However, there are genuine concerns that it has been losing its relentless focus and leadership role, so it is welcome that this debate has provided an opportunity to air those concerns.

There have been concerns about a decline in funding for certain HIV and AIDS projects, including cuts to direct funding for civil society organisations, which are so important in overcoming stigma and prejudice. There has been an overall shift away from bilateral programmes and HIV-specific projects. I accept that the Government will offer justification for that, which does have some reason behind it. Moving disease-specific programmes into wider sexual health or health and development programmes can, if done well, be more effective and sustainable. However, done badly it can undermine the work towards the goal. For example, among the clear challenges of such an approach is the problem of assessing exactly how much we are spending and what impact it is having. The hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth highlighted the example of the HIV policy marker, which seems rather opaque.

Over the last couple of years, as other Members have said, we have been without specific position papers or strategies to help assess priorities and the UK’s impact. Finally, there is a concern about a lack of ministerial presence and leadership at international meetings and summits.

There is no doubt that what DFID seeks to do is good and welcome—supporting country-led and integrated responses that meet the holistic needs of target populations—so why not say that loudly and boldly with a strategy? At the very least, be more explicit about HIV and AIDS policy goals in frameworks. Why not make funding more transparent, and the assessment of progress towards clear goals more robust? Why not...
once again play a robust, outspoken leadership role? The opportunity is there to meet the 2030 goal, and for the UK to be pivotal to that achievement. Let us grasp that opportunity.

4.59 pm

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on securing this debate.

Ten years ago on World AIDS Day, I was leading an HIV/AIDS programme on the edge of the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest on the border of Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. I started the clinic out of a shipping container, supported by a team of local health workers. It was baking hot and packed full of people desperate for care, in a place where all most people knew about HIV was encapsulated by the name that they used—akakoko ka silimu, translated as “the little insects that make you lose weight”. I saw too many people who did not know what was happening to them until they started coughing up blood from HIV or gave birth to a child who mysteriously died a few months later.

Within a couple of years, more than 2,000 people were getting treatment. Mother-to-child transmission had dropped from 30% to 1%. Every school child understood the basics about HIV and stigma was lifted by brave people, who were proudly positive. Yes, it was the drugs, and huge credit must go to President George Bush and the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief for making massive financial contributions at the right time to HIV/AIDS care but, more importantly, it was about the health system and the people delivering care.

In a part of the world where, on any given day, half of all health workers in Government facilities are absent, and where drug supplies rarely find their way to the front line, it is a huge leadership challenge to have happy, paid and competent health workers in the same place as needy patients, and with the drugs they need to help them.

I contacted a friend working in the field in Africa over the weekend. She told me that we are still a long way off where we need to be. She said that men are still not coming forward to test, that

“we don’t have enough drugs for everyone and are challenged by low stocks of ARVs”

and that adherence to treatment regimes is still a challenge. With the end of the HIV epidemic within our sights, now is not the time to disinvest—but disinvestment is exactly what we are starting to see, with a decline in funding between 2012 and 2015, from £416 million a year to £324 million a year, and a massive drop in funding for civil society organisations through the Robert Carr civil society Networks Fund.

I have two asks of the Minister. First, it would be really helpful to understand what the Department for International Development’s HIV/AIDS strategy is. We are currently investing more than £300 million a year of public money into HIV/AIDS, but without seeing that strategy, it is hard to communicate priorities or measure impact.

My second request is for reconsideration of the amount of financial investment. In many ways, the 20 million people currently on treatment, who were referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth, are the easiest-to-reach people. In healthcare, we need to spend more, not less, to reach the most disadvantaged. There are still 15 million people who either do not know their status or are not on treatment. In order to reach them, we need to invest more to engage them. If we do reach them, we have the potential for an amazing prize—the end of HIV as a global public health problem.

5.2 pm

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on securing this debate.

Members will be aware of the importance of the global fund, and I want to pay tribute to the important work the fund does in the diagnosis and treatment of HIV. It is clear today that without a supply of new medical tools, we are not going to meet our global goals promise to give young people the opportunity of a future free from AIDS.

In 2009 a trial showed for the first time that the risk of HIV infection can be reduced by a vaccine, and improved vaccine concepts are now entering new efficacy trials. There is no doubt that vaccine development is a long process, but vaccines are proven to be one of the most effective and cost-effective public health tools. With that in mind, I wish to pose two questions to the Minister about UK scientific innovation.

The Government recently published their industrial strategy, which placed life sciences at its centre. Will the Minister make representations to his counterparts in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy about the need for research and development for new HIV prevention tools to be part of that?

There has been little, if any, discussion about how the industrial strategy will offset the uncertainties for UK science created by Brexit. In recent years, the European Commission has overtaken the UK to become the second-largest funder of global health research and development after the US, with many UK scientists benefiting from the pooled funding and collaboration. Will the Minister reassure UK scientists about what the future will hold?

I asked the Minister a question last week. I was grateful for his answer and for the correction yesterday to that answer for accuracy. HIV is still the greatest health challenge of our time. Although it does not quite command front-page attention any more, it must not be put to the back of the Government’s and people’s minds. Investment in research and development will keep the fight against this challenge alive.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): We now come to the Front-Bench speeches, the first of which will be Chris Law from the Scottish National party.

5.5 pm

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen
Doughty) for bringing this important and timely debate and for his continuing work with the all-party parliamentary group.

This debate is an opportunity to reflect on the estimated 35 million people who have died from AIDS-related illnesses and to show solidarity with the millions of people living with HIV worldwide today. It is an honour to wear a red ribbon in solidarity with all of those people. However, for many of them, stigma remains a problem. Stigma leaves people feeling ostracised and experiencing poor mental health and social outcomes. Stigma is also one of the biggest barriers to testing and treatment, and fear of a HIV-positive diagnosis discourages individuals from getting tested and engaging with health services. For some, stigma means living in perpetual fear of their HIV status being revealed to whom they live, work and spend time.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) said earlier, in Scotland last week the First Minister took an HIV test, which gives instant results, as part of efforts to reduce the stigma surrounding the disease. Not only that but voluntary sector bodies, along with people living with the condition, joined together to unveil a new action plan in Scotland ahead of World AIDS Day. The anti-stigma strategy “Road Map to Zero” set out how organisations such as the National AIDS Trust, the Terrence Higgins Trust, HIV Scotland and others will continue to work with the Scottish Government and others to end HIV-related stigma.

We should all take pride in the fact that Scotland is a leader in HIV policy. It was the first nation in the UK to make PrEP available on the NHS and I pay tribute today to the campaigners who worked tirelessly for that to happen. PrEP is making a huge difference to the lives of many people in Scotland and I hope the UK will follow in Scotland’s footsteps.

At an international level, incredible achievements have been made in the global response to HIV. Some may argue that the worst is behind us, but sadly HIV is still a death sentence for many people across the globe. Sub-Saharan Africa remains most severely affected, with nearly one in every 25 adults living with HIV.

One of the UN’s sustainable development goals is to end AIDS by 2030. To reach that target, significant work still needs to be done. There are signs that the HIV response is beginning to stall. Key challenges remain. One is that the level of new infections each year is still too high. Only last week, the World Health Organisation highlighted the fact that the number of new infections in Europe is growing at an “alarming rate”. In central Asia, infections have increased by more than half since 2010. Key populations—for example, men who have sex with men, transgender people, people who use drugs and sex workers—are disproportionately affected by HIV. A further challenge is the high price of intellectual property and drug prices, which remain a barrier for HIV patients’ access to medicine. UNAIDS predicts we would need an additional $7 billion annually to respond to the global HIV challenge. However, total DFID HIV funding decreased by 22% between 2012 and 2015, and the Department’s last strategy on HIV expired more than two years ago. It has no plans to renew it.

Without a strategy, DFID has no way to set and communicate priorities or measure impact. I would therefore urge the Minister to increase overall levels of UK funding for the global HIV response, in line with UNAIDS recommendations, and to formalise and make public its approach to HIV. With current tools, we can hope to control the epidemic, but as the Gates Foundation has highlighted, to make headway towards ending it, we must bring down the number of new infections at a much faster rate. That will require new and better prevention technologies, such as an effective vaccine.

The Minister noted during last week’s DFID questions that the UK has been a long-standing supporter of the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative. We all agree about that, but it now needs action. The Government must increase research and development so that we have the necessary tools for the future.

We want to live in communities that have positive and non-stigmatising attitudes towards people who are affected by HIV. World AIDS Day and debates in Parliament help us to share that goal. Ultimately, World AIDS Day reminds the public, and MPs, that HIV has not gone away. Great scientific and medical progress has been made. As others have mentioned, treatment is dramatically more effective, and many more people are living long and healthy lives. At least that is the case in wealthy countries; it is not everywhere. The UK must show leadership in the global response to HIV and AIDS.

5.9 pm

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Mr Hollobone. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) for securing this important debate. As we all know, World AIDS Day was last Friday. I am glad that this debate has given Parliament an opportunity to reaffirm its commitment to tackling HIV and AIDS, both at home and abroad, which was evidenced by the large number of parliamentarians and others wearing red ribbons last week. I hope that that demonstrates our solidarity with those suffering from AIDS and our determination to bring it to an end. It was good to see town halls and other buildings around the country lit up in red last week—that was certainly the case for the town hall in my constituency. Again, that was evidence of our desire to do something about AIDS.

There has been progress on this issue globally. For the first time ever, more than half of the people living with HIV are receiving life-saving treatment. New HIV infections in 2013 were 38% lower than in 2001, and new HIV infections among children have declined by 58% since 2001. We should welcome that decline. Nevertheless, in 2016, there were 1.8 million new HIV infections worldwide, which is 1.8 million too many. That represents more than 2,700 deaths from HIV every day.

As my hon. Friend said, 36.7 million people live with AIDS globally, 69% of whom live in sub-Saharan Africa. Sustainable development goal 3, on good health and wellbeing, has a target of ending the AIDS epidemic by 2030. Despite some progress towards that goal, however, STOPAIDS has estimated that there is a funding gap of $7 billion, which needs to be filled to reach that target by 2030, and the US’s global gag rule will lead to a further decline in HIV funding.

I will ask the Minister later about what he intends to do about the funding gap, but in passing I note that women remain more vulnerable than men. In sub-Saharan Africa, which has the highest rates of HIV infections in
the world, there are three new infections among adolescent girls for every one among adolescent boys. Of course, HIV has a disproportionate impact on marginalised groups, especially in middle-income countries. That is further evidence of the systemic inequality that underpins our societies globally, which plays out particularly in terms of health services, information, education and economic opportunities, which are simply not attainable for many people.

I recognise that the Government have made much progress, but there are some issues I would like the Minister to address. Although the UK remains the second-largest donor to the global HIV response, it is concerning that total DFID funding for HIV/AIDS declined by 22% between 2012 and 2015. Although the UK has increased funding through multilateral institutions such as the global fund, that has not made up for the sharp decline in funding for DFID country office programmes, which fell from £221 million in 2009 to £23 million in 2015. There has been a decline in DFID funding for civil society organisations, which do such important work on the ground to tackle AIDS and HIV. We should pay tribute to them and ensure that their work is funded properly. Does the Minister intend to stop that reduction in funding and to fund those organisations properly?

Other hon. Members said that HIV and AIDS work is absent from the UK AIDS strategy. Does the Minister have plans to rectify that and bring forward a new strategy? Political leadership is important. DFID has not always been represented at international AIDS conferences. Does the Minister plan to ensure that we have a young representative attending those conferences? I want to finish by thanking my hon. Friends for their excellent contributions to this debate.

5.15 pm

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Alistair Burt): It is, as always, a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Hollobone. I thank the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) for securing this important debate to commemorate World AIDS Day. I thank all hon. Members who contributed; this subject unites everyone in the House, including my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson), the hon. Members for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma), for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald), for Stockton South (Dr Williams) and for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield), and the two Front-Bench spokesmen, the hon. Members for Dundee West (Chris Law) and for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods). They asked a range of questions. In the time available to me, I will not be able to cover them all, but in the time-honoured way, my Parliamentary Private Secretary has very kindly got a note of everyone who is here, so I will cover the questions I do not answer by way of letter. I will make sure the answers get out there.

This is an opportunity for colleagues to reflect on where we have got to. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth for mentioning the Lord Speaker, who did so much when he had the opportunity to do so, and the haunting quilt. It was particularly noticeable when there was the odd square of anonymity because somebody still did not want to reveal something. I think of the pain behind that expression, of what people have been through in the past, and of what some people still go through. The fact that they are unable to talk about it, when for many of us it has become much easier to deal with and talk about, is a measure of the pain behind some of those issues.

None of us has the experience of the hon. Member for Stockton South. We all noted his work in Uganda, where he used his commendable skills in the best possible way. I still remember visiting AIDS orphans in South Africa with my daughter at a time when it was very clear that the babies could not be kept at home because of the shame and stigma attached to the disease, so they were just dispatched. I remember thinking that the nurses looking after them were making an extraordinary contribution. The afternoon that we saw them, my daughter and I said we did not know what we could do in life that would possibly be as valuable as the love that those people demonstrated towards those children. That was 20-odd years ago. Time has moved on and we are doing so much more.

Let me reflect a little on the progress that has been made, which colleagues mentioned, and then answer some of the tougher questions that come the way of a Minister. It is all part of the day job, even for an issue on which we are all broadly moving in the same direction. I commend the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth for his speech, and the work of the all-party parliamentary group on HIV and AIDS, which has achieved so much over the years. I thank him for advance sight of the questions in his speech. It was much appreciated.

We have come a long way since the first ever World AIDS Day in 1988. We now have 20 million people with access to potentially life-saving HIV treatment—a big improvement on the year 2000, when less than 1% of those in need had access. We can be very proud that the number of new infections in children has also dramatically declined. It is important to put on the record the UK’s contribution to those achievements. Colleagues have been generous about that, and of course it covers Governments of all persuasions. The UK continues to play its role. We are proud to be the second-largest international funder of HIV prevention treatment and care. That work is impossible without our partners, through which we invest. Our contribution to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria helped to provide more than 11 million people with antiretroviral therapy by the end of 2016. Our significant pledge of £1.1 billion to the fifth replenishment of the global fund will now help provide enough life-saving antiretroviral therapy for 1.3 million people living with HIV.

Our investments in research and support to Unitaid help improve access to medicines, diagnostics and prevention for those affected by HIV in low-income countries by bringing promising new health technologies to scale faster and more cheaply. The hon. Member for East Lothian was right to raise the importance of carrying on with such research. We must also recognise UNAIDS for its continued leadership of the global HIV response, for pushing for ambitious global targets to stop new infections and to ensure everyone living with HIV has access to treatment, for promoting human rights, and for producing the data we need for decision making.
Civil society with its links to communities and people living with HIV also has a critical role to play in leading the social movement for prevention, championing the rights of the most at-risk populations and those living with HIV, providing care and support services to communities that others are simply unable to provide, and—vitaly—holding Governments to account.

Jim Shannon: In our contributions, some of us have recognised the good work of Churches and missions across the seas and at home. For the record, does the Minister too recognise the importance of their input physically, financially and emotionally into making the changes?

Alistair Burt: I do. The hon. Gentleman’s connections with Churches and Church movements not only in this country but worldwide are well known. Absolutely, that is an important point to put on the record because to some extent it sets the record straight about the commitment of the Church and Christian communities to this particular sort of work, which is important. In some parts of the world, only the Church network is there to provide social care across the board. We would all be the poorer without being able to support that.

Mention was made of the Robert Carr civil society Networks Fund, of which we are proud to be a founding member. I cannot give a further commitment at this stage—we are yet to announce it—but I recognise the issue and we will come back to say what the future funding position will be in due course. I have noted what colleagues have said.

There is also greater shared responsibility from low and middle-income countries. Domestic resources constituted 57% of the total resources for HIV in low and middle-income countries, which is a step in the right direction, but more needs to happen to build a sustained response. As good as that is, as all colleagues have said, there is much more to do, so let me deal with some of the questions I was asked.

In terms of the broad strategy, the UK’s ongoing HIV commitment is that we want to see AIDS ended as a public health threat by 2030. That is an important priority for us. We are proud to be the second-largest international funder of HIV prevention, treatment and care, as I have said, and as a leading donor we will use our influence to ensure that we collectively deliver on the global commitment—to end the AIDS epidemic as a public health threat by 2030—and that no one is left behind.

In relation to the gag, we will continue to show global health leadership by promoting and supporting comprehensive, evidence-based sexual and reproductive health and rights. We are the second largest donor for family planning assistance and we are the largest donor to UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund, so we will skirt around issues raised by the gag.

On a new HIV strategy, the note I have states that the 2013 review of the UK position paper on zero infections identified the integration of HIV as the key strategic priority. We intend to continue that approach, rather than to develop a stand-alone strategy or conduct a further review. However, I have heard what the House has said, so let me reflect a little on that, as I will on the Youth Agenda point—whether HIV is included. It is not currently. Clearly, the Youth Agenda is a very important part of our strategy and we recognise, as all in the Chamber do, the significance of adolescent girls in particular and the related issues. Again, let me have a look at that to see whether we can say anything further about it. I will come back to colleagues in due course.

For women and girls generally, it was right to recognise the heightened risk. Empowerment of women and girls lies at the heart of our development agenda. DFID is supporting the generation of new evidence to improve outcomes for women and girls, including the development of female-initiated HIV prevention technologies, research into how gender inequality drives epidemics, and a particular focus on improving what works for adolescent girls in southern Africa.

The UK is also working with the global fund to increase its focus on girls and women, which I think is in accordance with the House’s wishes. Giving greater attention to women and girls is a shared priority for us and the global fund. With UK support, the global fund has embraced gender equality as being central to accomplishing its mission of ending the three diseases as epidemics, including it as one of its four strategic objectives in the 2017 to 2022 strategy. Between 55% and 60% of global fund spending directly benefits women and girls. That includes programmes to prevent gender-based violence and to provide post-violence services. The number of HIV-positive women since 2002 who have received services to prevent transmission of HIV to unborn children has reached 3.6 million, and we will continue to press on that.

Stephen Doughty: I welcome what the Minister has said about looking again at the issue of a strategy and, in particular, the situation with young people and women and girls. We have obviously got the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting here next year. I suggest gently to the Minister that it would be very helpful to have a strong statement setting out the UK’s views on HIV and AIDS in those communities while we have the Commonwealth Heads in this country.

Alistair Burt: It is a competitive field to get things on the agenda for the Commonwealth Heads of Government summit. I know that health will play a leading part, but the details have not yet been sorted. As would be expected, concerns about HIV/AIDS are certainly well up there and an announcement will be made in due course.

The UK Government will, however, be represented at the international AIDS conference in Amsterdam in July. Precise attendance is still to be finalised, but that depends on my diary and whether we can fit it in. I would really like to go because I think that is what colleagues would wish.

Turning to finance—on which I will write further—there are two issues. On the STOPAIDS suggestion of a 22% cut, our response is that the report gives a snapshot of the figures in a given year and does not always reflect everything that is going on as programmes come to an end and others start. It also does not reflect our huge multi-year global fund contribution. The timing of disbursements partly accounts for the difference in spend between years, but committing £2.4 billion since 2010 to multilateral funds is substantial.

The other issue was integrating the funds and the tracking. DFID uses an HIV policy objective marker to track spending on HIV within broader programming.
The system ensures that programmes address a range of developmental priorities, such as health-systems strengthening, governance, social protection and sexual, reproductive and health rights. I take the point that it is difficult to track, but it is important that we put the funds into integrated services, as well as spending them directly.

There are the technical challenges of tracking, so let me take that away as well—not necessarily to change it, but to see what might be done better to give more transparency. We will keep the process of integrating the funds going. It is right and proper to do so, along with the other commitments that we make. With that, let me sit down to allow the hon. Member for Cardiff South a couple of minutes to sum up.

5.28 pm  
Stephen Doughty: I thank all the Members who have taken part today, and in particular the Minister for his encouraging response on a series of issues. I am delighted to hear that he is thinking of attending the international AIDS conference in Amsterdam. The signal sent out by ministerial and official attendance at such forums is crucial, particularly given the very strong leadership role that the UK has played over many years. When people do not see us at those conferences and events, they wonder what is going on, so what the Minister said is really heartening.

I also welcome the Minister’s willingness to go away and look at some of the issues we have raised on strategy and on funding and its tracking. I know that those things are sometimes not easy, but given the nature of HIV and AIDS, and other issues such as TB, for example, it is important to understand what funding is going towards those epidemics and how it is being spent, so that we can all hold the Government to account. In some cases, it is also important for the Government to show how they are providing leadership to other countries and international organisations.

Clearly, there is much unity across the House on the importance of keeping this issue on the agenda and of us all continuing to play our part in ensuring that we tackle the HIV/AIDS epidemic in this country and globally. The message is very clear that this is not over. We need to keep the issue on the agenda, and we will all play our part in doing so.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered World AIDS Day 2017.

5.30 pm  
Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Wednesday 6 December 2017

[Mrs Madeleine Moon in the Chair]

Youth Employment

9.30 am

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered youth employment.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. This is the first Westminster Hall debate I have led. Providing young people with the opportunity to get a good job has been a mission of this Government, and I am pleased that this debate is set against a backdrop of such positive figures.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): On a point of order, Mrs Moon. Can something be done about the sound system, please?

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): I will have to stop the hon. Lady. We cannot proceed until the mics are working properly. We have an engineer on the way. I am not sure what this will do in knocking the rest of the day off in Westminster Hall, but we have to wait for the engineer, because otherwise we cannot broadcast the sound.

Gillian Keegan: Providing young people with the opportunity to get a good job has been a mission of this Government, and I am pleased that this debate is set against the backdrop of such positive figures. From July to September this year, we saw more than half of 16 to 24-year-olds in work and a further third in full-time education. Figures from the Office for National Statistics show that youth unemployment is at its lowest point since 2001, falling by 71,000 in the past year alone. We have experienced that in Chichester, with youth unemployment now less than one third of what it was in 2010.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing a huge important debate. She mentions the figures. In percentage terms, the figure is 11.9%, and the lowest it has ever been is 11.6%. I invite her to the all-party parliamentary group for youth employment. We meet on the day that the ONS figures come out. Our most recent project is on those furthest from the labour market. If we can unlock that, we can improve the figures even further.

Gillian Keegan: I agree, and I would love to come along. The figures are really good news, as my hon. Friend said, and they are even more impressive when compared with those of some of our near neighbours in Europe, although one should not take the success for granted.

At the start of the last global recession, I was working in Spain. In that time, I saw youth unemployment reach nearly 50% at its peak, and I saw at first hand the devastating effect that can have on young people’s lives. I lived in a block of flats in Madrid, and it was difficult to watch as many of my neighbours were made redundant. Even worse was seeing young people graduate from university or college and applying for job after job with no success. It is heartbreaking to watch talented and qualified young people spend years trying to get on the first rung of the ladder. Being continuously rejected is demoralising for anyone, and I wish I could say that the situation has improved in the eight years since I left Madrid, but it has not. Many of the same people are still out of work and struggling to get by. The youth unemployment rate in Spain remains very high at 38.7%, and the situation has been ongoing for almost a decade. They genuinely have lost a generation of opportunity.

The wider EU average unemployment rate is currently at 16.7%, with Greece at 43.3% at the top of the list above Spain. In the UK we compare comparatively well, with youth unemployment at 11.9%. Although we can celebrate the success we have seen in getting more young people into work, still our goal must be to ensure that all 16 to 24-year-olds are either earning or learning. That is crucial, as we need to increase our skills for growing businesses and raise the career aspirations of the next generation. The priority must be to remove the barriers to young people getting into work. To do this we need to ensure our younger generations have a variety of routes into the workplace.

When I left school at 16 there were no decent sixth-form colleges in the area that I lived in in Knowsley. I had 10 O-levels, but where was I to go and what was I to do? I was fortunate enough to get an apprenticeship. I really was lucky because only five places were available. Many of my fellow school leavers would have benefited from the wide variety of apprenticeships on offer today.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): On the subject of apprenticeships, one of the difficulties that we face in Northern Ireland, certainly in my constituency, is that 25 young people will start an apprenticeship but five will finish it. How can we change that mindset?

Gillian Keegan: That is an important point. I would like to put in a plug for apprenticeships, but they need to be high quality.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I commend the hon. Lady on securing this debate. One of the things I was concerned about in the recent Budget was the announcement that the minimum wage for apprentices will go from £3.50 an hour to £3.70 an hour. I appreciate that not all apprentices are paid at that level, but does she share my concern about the pitifully low rate of pay that apprentices are paid under the UK minimum wage?

Gillian Keegan: As the hon. Gentleman says, not all apprentices are paid at the minimum level. I certainly was not when I did my apprenticeship, but an apprentice is earning and learning and the model still works at the minimum wage.
Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): To continue that point, I have experience of meeting apprentices in my constituency. They are hugely grateful for the opportunity to work with businesses. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is the role that business plays that is critical in making apprenticeships a success? It has been the engine driving the remarkable increase in apprenticeships over the past several years. The growth has been miraculous.

Gillian Keegan: I completely agree. I believe I am the only degree-level apprentice in the House—I have not found another one so far—so I know about this from personal experience.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Does she agree that for apprenticeships to be of a high quality there needs to be a vibrant partnership between business and higher education? In my constituency, Forth Valley College has developed a network of connections with local business and is delivering the talent and capabilities that businesses need to flourish and prosper.

Gillian Keegan: I completely agree that that is the best model.

I spent three years working in every part of the business that I started in, which was a car factory in Liverpool. In parallel I studied business management up to degree level. By the time I moved on to my next job in senior management at NatWest Bank, I had seven years’ work experience, a degree and no student debt. That is the ideal route into the workplace. It has many advantages, particularly for working-class kids such as I was.

I welcome the Government’s recognition of apprenticeships as they are a great way to get into work and learn about business. Since 2010, 3 million apprenticeships are now available, with a target of 3 million more by 2020. That is a significant achievement, but it is not about numbers. It is the good quality training and skills that work for both the employer and employer that are key.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) implied, colleges, universities and business are developing successful collaborative relationships across the country. Chichester College—a college of further education—has achieved that with more than 25,000 apprentices who have passed through its doors, and its success continues, with increased participation year on year.

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. I know it is extremely important to her to get more young people into good quality jobs. Does she agree that partnerships need to be formed with businesses of the future? Some 50% of all those in the east are in engineering and manufacturing, and West Suffolk College, an outstanding college in my constituency, hopes to launch an institute of technology. Employers with high quality degree apprenticeships and high quality routes up to those is what is really important.

Gillian Keegan: I completely agree. Hearing that kind of message coming from Suffolk is music to my ears, because it is a fantastic model and will provide great opportunities for young people today.

Chichester College has put employability at the heart of its curriculum and has developed key relationships within industry, as we have discussed, over many years. Now it also offers students in-work educational programmes. Many of its courses were designed with some of the 5,000 businesses that it works with. One such example is URT Group, a manufacturing firm that works in a diverse range of industries from defence to motorsport. Its business is centred around apprenticeships in every area. In fact, two former apprentices are now in senior management roles in that business.

Business and colleges working together also ensures that skill gaps in local industry are filled. Chichester College also runs seven different construction courses, with more than 1,000 students. The Government are committed to building more homes in the UK, and the students in Chichester will build the homes of the future. Many of the college graduates go on to set up their own businesses, and they in turn take on apprentices. Others come back to run classes and workshops to share their skills.

There are also people who are not in work. They want to take the first step, and universal credit provides greater flexibility to support that journey. It is important to remember that people cannot move up the career ladder until they are on it. Once rolled out, universal credit is expected to boost employment by 250,000. Importantly, elements such as the in-work progression scheme increase expectation and aspiration to seize opportunities to earn more. We recognise that the transition from jobseeker’s allowance to universal credit has caused some concerns, so I welcome the interventions by the Department for Work and Pensions and the Chancellor to tackle those concerns with the recent announcements in the Budget.

Across the country there is still more to do to enable young people to get into work. In the north-east, youth unemployment is at 18%. By contrast, in the south-east it is 10%. We are also seeing ethnic differentials too, and I would welcome further investigation into why that is the case. Thus far the statistics show that those who do not attain grades at school are more likely to end up not in education, employment or training, as so-called NEETs. Despite 1.9 million more children attending a good or outstanding school since 2010, some young people do underachieve during their educational years, but that should not disadvantage them for life.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. Given the welcome stats that we received about two weeks ago showing the reduction in net immigration into the UK, does she agree that if employment stats continue to improve, as we all hope they will, we will need to see a nationwide retraining of our young people to try to fill what may well be a gap, if we do not do that emphatically and comprehensively across the nation?

Gillian Keegan: Yes, I do agree. As we would say in business, that is a nice problem to have.

Programmes such as “Get into”, which is run by the Prince’s Trust, are fantastic for those who underachieve at school. The scheme works by getting young people on to a four-week placement across a range of industries. It provides an opportunity that for many is a vital life chance, with almost a quarter of those in the programme
having been unemployed for more than two years. Many large companies—for example, Accenture, Arvato, and HP—now offer young people opportunities to get into the workplace via the “Get into” programme run by the Prince’s Trust.

One participant, Michelle, was physically and sexually abused for years, and understandably suffered from depression and started offending. After going on the programme, she said:

“Without the Trust’s support, I would have carried on being self-destructive, with no future to look forward to. Instead I’m happy, sociable and I’m actually excited about where my life is going.”

Her words highlight the importance of getting young people into work and giving them the opportunity to build self-esteem and purpose.

**John Howell (Henley) (Con):** Would my hon. Friend recommend that prisons offer more apprenticeships? They have to provide a work focus for their prisoners, and it would be extremely useful if they offered apprenticeships as part of that.

**Gillian Keegan:** That is an excellent point. I recently visited Wormwood Scrubs, and I think that would be a fantastic programme to help people who, ultimately, have just taken the wrong path in life, but really do want to rejoin the workplace upon leaving prison.

Last Monday, I went to St Pancras church in Chichester, which runs a breakfast for some of the 80 homeless people and rough-sleepers in the city. There I met a young girl who has been through the care system and now finds herself without a roof over her head. She feels that she lacks the experience and support to get into work. Some 24% of those between the ages of 16 and 18 who have been in care are categorised as not in education, employment or training. That is why programmes such as “Choose Work”, run by Chichester District Council, are so important. They help people to access work experience, helping them on to the first rung of the ladder. I am also delighted to say that the young girl I met on my visit is now in supported housing.

One area of concern is wage stagnation. Figures for 22 to 29 year-olds suggest a decline of 5.5% in real-term wages, compared with 2008. Clearly, the effects of the financial crisis are still present. The Government’s policies on the minimum wage and raising the tax thresholds have gone some way to protect those on the lowest incomes; however, the more skills and qualifications one has, the better the wage, so we must enable young people to upskill and increase their earnings and living standards.

The Government’s role is to help people develop. As the proverb says:

“Be not afraid of growing slowly, be afraid only of standing still.”

To ensure that does not happen, the Government have launched several schemes to bring about greater youth opportunity. The adult education budget, for example, provides free training to those who are over the age of 19 and unemployed, up to and including level 2 qualifications. All that is arranged through the jobcentre. Similarly, the youth engagement fund, launched in 2014, aims to improve education outcomes and employability for disadvantaged young people. More generally, education is diversifying, with the first three T-levels now launched, supported by a further £500 million a year, once those programmes are fully rolled out. They will provide yet another path to a career for young people.

The Government do need to do more for some groups, such as those with a disability. Figures from 2016 show that the youth employment rate is only 38% in those groups. I recently met a constituent whose son Josh has autism. She managed to get him on a work experience programme in IT. Some roles, such as those in IT, are very well suited for people with disabilities such as autism. The overwhelming effect of the work experience was positive, and his mum told me that he was less anxious, and over the period began to open up more and more—a significant challenge for young people with autism. We must do more to help that group.

**Michael Tomlinson:** Will my hon. Friend commend the work of charities such as Leonard Cheshire Disability, which does some excellent work in this area, encouraging those who are disabled to get work experience, and from there to get into the world of work as well?

**Gillian Keegan:** Yes, I think that is an excellent scheme. The next generation stands at the precipice of the fourth industrial revolution, with big advances in next-generation technology, such as artificial intelligence and biotech. The next generation is also composed of digital natives: those who have embraced completely the power of mobile computing. As a nation, we are preparing to spearhead that advance, and we need to lead in the latest industrial revolution. Businesses can rely on world-class centres of education and research, with a strong digital foundation—one in eight of all global data flows are already hosted in the UK. That is powerful when combined with our nation’s historic foundations of common law and internationally respected institutions, plus the Chancellor’s Budget announcements of increased investment in research and development, tech infrastructure and skills development. Put together, our potential is real.

Tech waves themselves can provide a mechanism for social mobility. I was young once, and the internet revolution during the ’90s helped me to build a great career. Sitting in my comprehensive classroom in Huyton, in Knowsley, I never thought that I would be negotiating technology deals in Japan just 10 years later—but nobody else knew how to do that either.

To fulfil the needs of industry, we need to ensure that there are opportunities for young people to get high-quality training that meets the needs of business. The fresh food industry in Chichester is worth £1 billion, and currently has a shortage of engineers to handle both the advanced robotics and the chemical elements involved in growing produce. The advanced manufacturing and engineering sector in the Coast to Capital local enterprise partnership represents 4.4% of all businesses, so it is important to upskill young people to fill those roles. Increasing the number of people taking up science, technology, engineering and maths qualifications is therefore vital for industry.

**Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con):** My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Does she agree that there is an onus on industries to go into schools and other institutions to tell young people about the
opportunities that await them? Sheer effort enabled her to achieve what she did in her career, but lots of people do not get the chance even to know what opportunities might be available to them. It is happening on industries’ watch, and they need to address that.

**Gillian Keegan:** I completely agree. In my case, without an inspiring maths teacher, who was also my careers teacher, I would not have even heard about the opportunity of an apprenticeship.

The University of Chichester is investing in a new technology park, where they will put a bit of STEAM into STEM, by facilitating the relationship between art, design and sciences. The university is adopting a model of “Conceive, design, implement, operate”, which is supported by the Royal Academy of Engineering. That model has already been adopted by 12 other UK universities, and aims to close the gap in higher-level engineering, creative digital technology, data science and sustainability skills. The investment that we see in our universities is welcome, and that boost in development is very much down to the effects of a guaranteed income, provided by student fees. No longer do universities suffer from underfunding by successive Governments.

Implementing new courses and facilities is key if we are to ensure that we meet the expected needs of industry. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy estimates that 56,000 level 3 apprenticeships will be needed each year to meet the needs of the engineering sector alone. At present, we have 26,000.

Alongside investment in better education and routes into work, we must put appropriate structures in place to encourage careers in the technology and engineering sectors. Careers services, as we have just discussed, need to move into the 21st century. I therefore welcome the introduction of a new careers strategy, launched on Monday this week. The most important element of the new strategy is the “Good career guidance”. Advice will be forward-looking and in tune with the developments in the technological landscape that we all now live in. I am pleased that the strategy includes industry interacting with our schools, and I hope that that will inspire young people.

The strategy follows the work of Jobcentre Plus, which already works with children in schools from the ages of 12 to 18 to discuss career options and inform them of all the alternative routes into work. I hope that today’s debate will emphasise the importance of a diverse range of routes into work and mechanisms to support the next generation to achieve their aspirations. We will focus on creating opportunity and raising aspirations for young people. I have spoken about people who have turned their lives around by getting into work, including myself. Getting all 16 to 24 year-olds either earning or learning is the right goal for us all.

In preparing for the debate, I looked back on my school years. Almost every one of my classmates in my failing comprehensive school had talent and the potential to achieve whatever they put their mind to. Some of us beat the odds and got life chances, in spite of our schooling. My life chance was my apprenticeship. Others did not get such an opportunity. They were let down in their education. My life chance was my apprenticeship. Others were not offered enough support, or alternative routes into work when they left school at just 16. If only they were now leaving school, they would have a far greater chance to achieve their potential.

The fourth industrial revolution brings with it opportunity—opportunity for future generations to grow into high-skilled and high-paid jobs. Investing in young people has to be the wisest investment a country can make, as they are the only future we have. The Government have a good record on youth employment, and I welcome their steps to improve it. By creating opportunity and life chances, like the one I got, we can have a future generation that is better educated, more skilled and more highly paid. Investing in the young is investing in the future of Great Britain and will, I believe, make us much greater still.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair):** Order. I advise Members that we are now recording again, and have been for most of the hon. Lady’s speech. We have very limited time. I am not going to impose a time limit, but I advise Members not to take more than six minutes, if they hope to allow other colleagues to get in.

10 am

**Mhairi Black** (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) on securing this debate on an often neglected area—well done on that.

When doing research ahead of this debate, I was disheartened, although not surprised, to learn that people aged 16 to 24 are more likely than any other age group to be employed on zero-hours contracts, be in temporary employment, be stuck in part-time employment or be in unskilled work.

**Rachel Maclean** (Redditch) (Con): The hon. Lady is absolutely right to highlight that issue, but does she recognise that the research briefing shows that, although zero-hours contracts do not suit everybody, they do suit a number of people? Some people study at the same time and welcome the flexibility that zero-hours contracts give them. My son is on a zero-hours contract and it suits him down to the ground. He is 18 and is getting experience he would not otherwise get.

**Mhairi Black:** I genuinely appreciate the hon. Lady’s point, but if she is suggesting that all young people benefit from zero-hours contracts, she is on a different planet. If that is not what she is saying, that is fine. That kind of overly positive attitude towards zero-hours contracts is something that we would read in a Tory party briefing, rather than any other briefing.

I suspect that the Government’s response to any criticism during this debate will be to say that the number of young people not in education, employment or training has been slowly falling—magic! We could say, “Well done,” welcome the fall and simply leave it at that, but like all things in life the situation is more complicated than that. That kind of argument completely ignores the quality of the work. Putting ourselves on the back about the falling numbers is all well and good, but if they are falling because people are working in insecure jobs that do not last long, is it really worth celebrating?
If the Government have lowered those figures by pushing people into destitution and poverty—that is my experience since I was elected—is that really something to celebrate? That is not to mention the pitiful minimum wage, which my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) talked about, which starts at £4.05 for those under the age of 18. I do not see how anyone can afford to run a household on £4.05 an hour, especially if we consider the fact that the Government have seen fit to take away housing benefit from 18 to 21-year-olds.

Organisations such as the Resolution Foundation are reporting that the Government’s tax and social security policies will drive the biggest increase in inequality since Thatcher. I know that the Government greatly admire that woman, but perhaps they will look past their ideological nostalgia and look again at how they achieved those falling numbers.

The Government could consider following the lead of the Scottish Government, who achieved their target of reducing youth unemployment by 40% four years ahead of schedule. Going further, the Scottish Government will introduce a jobs grant to help even more 16 to 24-year-olds into work. Funnily enough, I highly recommend the Scottish Government’s work, given that Scotland has the lowest youth unemployment in the UK and one of the best youth employment rates in the whole of Europe.

Stephen Kerr: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mhairi Black: I am coming to my concluding remarks.

The Government could consider following the lead of Renfrewshire Council, in the area I represent. Following the implementation of its “Invest in Renfrewshire” scheme, youth unemployment fell by more than 80%. I have met some of the people who have reaped the benefits of that scheme. It has motivated nearly 850 local employers to support young unemployed people and has stimulated job creation, taking Renfrewshire from being the sixth-worst local authority area in Scotland for youth employment to being the fourth best. The hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) mentioned the importance of working with business and working with the community.

I mention those success stories not for the sake of petty political point scoring. Surely any decent Government should listen to constructive criticism and look for solutions. The reality is that young people leaving university have huge debts and have to take on insecure and unskilled work. They face wage stagnation like we have never known—literally the worst in more than 200 years—as well as the huge uncertainty of Brexit and an impossible-to-reach housing ladder. After all these years of watching austerity push people—particularly the young, the disabled and women—towards food banks and into poverty, surely it is time to reconsider this regime and look at other solutions.

10.5 am

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend for bringing me on to the next point in my speech. I am delighted to hear that youth unemployment in Aldershot has gone down, and I am pleased to say that it is a similar picture in Redditch. In 2010, 620 young people were unemployed and the figure now is 185. That is a significant drop, with 435 fewer unemployed young people.

I want to return briefly to the point made by the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) about zero-hours contracts and flexibility. I accept that they should not be forced on people—I want to put that statement on the record—but they offer flexibility for young people. Apprenticeships give people the flexibility to earn while they learn. The workplace today is changing massively, as are jobs and work. We need to make sure that employers get behind that in a positive way so that it is an opportunity for young people.
Mhairi Black: I accept what the hon. Lady said for the record, but does she also accept that zero-hours contracts—certainly in the experience of my constituents and even people I know—are forced on people? Not only are they expected to function with a household and often with a livelihood and children; they also live with uncertainty about how much money will be coming in. That, unfortunately, is a reality for far too many people.

Rachel Maclean: I completely accept the hon. Lady’s point. We have a picture of much lower employment across the country, including in her constituency. The Select Committee on Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is specifically considering cases of exploitation.

Stephen Kerr: Is my hon. Friend looking forward to the Government’s formal response to the Matthew Taylor report, which we hope will go some way towards ironing out some of the inequities that might exist in the issues raised by the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black)?

Rachel Maclean: Yes, and I thank my hon. Friend for reminding me about the absolutely brilliant work that is being done. This Government banned exploitative zero-hours contracts that prevent people from taking on other work, so how such contracts can be a solution, although I still recognise that they should not be forced on people or be the only option. We want more opportunities across the board for people of all ages.

I will finish by bringing to the House’s attention another positive story that I heard from my Jobcentre Plus office in Redditch. My constituent, who was under the local authority care system, attended her universal credit appointment and was asked by the work coach why she was making a claim. She said that she desperately needed to get a job; she was not happy in her care home and she needed to earn to move on. The work coach explained that she would not be entitled to universal credit because the local authority was responsible for her until her 18th birthday, but that the jobcentre would help by looking over her CV and advising her about job search sites. At the time there was a provider in the office with whom the work coach worked closely. They discussed what the provider could offer and how people could be helped into work.

Redditch Jobcentre Plus has a very high success rate for customers getting training through the provider, the Training Academy. The work coach took my constituent there to introduce her personally and to explain that she was only 16. The contact at the provider asked if he could help my constituent in any way and invited her to enrol at the academy the following day. That day, the work coach received an email to say that the provider had secured an interview on the same day for my constituent, closely followed by an email with a photograph of her holding up a plaque stating, “I got the job”. What a fantastic result for her: she went from being told that she would not be entitled to any universal credit, to securing full-time employment within two days. I have many more stories, but that is a fantastic example of how universal credit is helping young people into employment when provided with a package of full support, as is the case in Redditch.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your stewardship, Mrs Moon. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) on securing this debate and I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on an issue that is so important to my constituency and to the UK as a whole.

According to Eurostat, at 12% the UK has one of the lowest youth unemployment rates in the European Union, ranking us ninth out of 28. Indeed, youth unemployment is a major issue in much of the EU. By comparison, Greece has a youth unemployment rate of 44%, Spain 39%, Italy 35%, Portugal 24%, France 23% and Belgium 22%. As my hon. Friend said, however, that does not happen by accident.

A great deal of work has been done by this Government and the coalition to drive down youth unemployment, because under the previous Labour Government it rose by 45%, creating something of a lost generation. Although this UK Government have made concerted efforts to tackle youth unemployment, it is still higher than we want it to be.

Since May 2010 the UK Government have created more than 3 million apprenticeships, which are keeping more young people in education and giving them the skills needed to excel and make progress in their careers. As a result, youth unemployment has been steadily decreasing and, at a time when so much of Europe is suffering from substantial youth unemployment, I am particularly pleased that the UK is bucking the trend.

That is a record to be proud of, but we cannot simply rest on our laurels. My hon. Friend has referred to those not in education, employment or training. On those 18 to 24-year-old jobseeker’s allowance and universal credits claimants required to seek work, the most recent ONS figures available to the House of Commons Library show that the UK rate is 2.8%. In Scotland the figure is higher, at 3.3%, while in Ochil and South Perthshire that rate of youth unemployment is 3.8%, which is higher still. I am concerned that Scotland has a higher rate of youth unemployment than the rest of the UK. The rate is higher still in my constituency, which is why it is such a big issue for me.

Since being elected I have met youth groups across my constituency, including the Logos project in Crieff and Developing the Young Workforce in Clackmannanshire, to understand the challenges young people face and how employers and politicians can work together to remove barriers to youth involvement in the labour market. When I speak to youth groups, I ask them what the barriers are, and young people identify transport, the range of jobs available and employer recruitment processes as obstacles to employment.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is talking about employment. We all welcome seeing young people go up the ladder—although I do not welcome zero-hours contracts—but a trend has started in the places in Scotland that he is talking about of young people taking jobs in return for work experience. One youth has worked 13 hours for three weeks, but he has not been paid for it because employers know that people want to put such experience on their CVs and job applications. What are the Government doing to prevent that from happening?
Luke Graham: Our issue will be a devolved one, but to be fair to the Scottish Government, they are introducing incentives such as the recruitment incentive, which provides up to £4,000 to employers to help young people get rewarded for some of the work they are doing. On the specific point about work experience, employers need to work with the young person’s educational establishment to ensure that they are not just getting free labour and that true work experience is being gained; otherwise, as is sometimes said, some get the work and others get the experience.

As I was saying, young people raise the issue of the range of jobs available and other obstacles in the recruitment process. Meanwhile, employers tell me about the lack of suitable qualifications and work ethic as reasons that they do not hire young people locally. Government have a significant role to play here, as do MPs and MSPs. We must build a bridge between the two groups to improve opportunities for our communities and to progress young people’s development.

The key to such progress, as in so many areas, is education. I have already mentioned the successes of apprenticeships and the impact that such schemes have had on youth employment. In Scotland we have consistently created about 26,000 starts per year since 2011-12.

Stephen Kerr: Does my hon. Friend agree that there is no difference in value in a young school leaver going into work, college or university? Perhaps we have spent too long putting too much emphasis on university as a higher route, rather than looking at all those options as having equal value.

Luke Graham: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend and I will develop that point shortly.

That figure of 26,000 starts per year is some credit to the Scottish Government—it is a strong result—but I have concerns about higher education. Only 8% of Scottish 18-year-olds from the most deprived areas enter university, compared with 17% in England, 15% in Wales and 14% in Northern Ireland. Eighteen-year-olds from deprived areas in Scotland are therefore significantly less likely to have the opportunity to attend university than those of the same age anywhere else in the United Kingdom.

Education is, of course, devolved in Scotland, but the existing policy of free tuition fees is clearly not delivering for the most deprived in my constituency. Furthermore, in order to pay for the free university tuition fees, since coming to power the Scottish National party Administration in Edinburgh has cut about 150,000 college places in Scotland, further denying people another route to education. That is a great shame, especially when the staff of colleges such as Forth Valley in my constituency are working so hard to provide opportunities and to adjust to the challenges of lifelong learning.

Academic education and vocational training are not the only answers to youth unemployment. We need more initiatives to improve social capital. In areas of deprivation, young people face not only material shortcomings, but a shortfall in social capital. That means that the boy or girl born on the council scheme does not have the connections to get the work experience that they desire. Those from a workless household do not always have the chance or guide to show them not just what they are, but what they could be. For too many, their background and birth deny them the freedom to pursue their true aspiration and calling. That is why I welcome the Government’s groundbreaking TUC-CBI industrial strategy, which provides opportunities and skills throughout life. The scheme does not apply in Scotland, but I gently remind the Minister that he is a Minister for the whole of the United Kingdom, and I know that my constituents would welcome the expansion of the scheme to Scotland and, specifically, my constituency.

The UK unemployment rate is lower than most, but the higher average youth unemployment rate in Scotland, and in my constituency, shows that current policies are not as effective as they could be. By recognising this, I hope that colleagues across the House and in the devolved Administration can work constructively and creatively to tackle this challenge and to ensure that young people have the opportunities they deserve.

10.19 am

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mrs Moon. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) on securing the debate.

Youth employment in the United Kingdom is indeed a good news story. The overall picture for employment is good, with 32.06 million people in work, reflecting an employment rate of 75%, which is the highest for four decades. Since 2010, the Conservatives—not alone but in partnership with industry—have delivered a staggering 3 million more jobs, giving more people the dignity of work and the security of a pay packet, which may be an old-fashioned term these days. At the same time, the Conservatives have taken millions out of tax altogether, and they have created and increased the living wage.

Many of the beneficiaries are our young people. Since 2010, the number of young people out of work has gone down by more than 400,000. That is a not insignificant figure. In my constituency, youth unemployment has more than halved, from 825 in 2010 to 370 in 2017. For those among us who are not mathematicians, that is a fall of 455 young people. That has to be welcomed, but there are still challenges. We have to focus on those 455 and get them on that ladder to success.

The number of apprenticeships is at record levels, with more to come. New, modern apprenticeship schemes are in place throughout the UK, although there are variations. We are giving people the skills to thrive in a new economy, by launching a partnership of the Government, the CBI and the TUC. As my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester mentioned, we need to try to push that throughout the United Kingdom, and Scotland would welcome that way forward.

Manufacturing growth is at a four-year high—the highest since 2013—and that brings job opportunities for our young people. Despite the growth in manufacturing, the Chancellor plans to invest £31 billion to further rejuvenate productivity. That figure includes an additional £8 billion, aimed primarily at key areas of housing, transport, research and, perhaps more importantly, digital communications, which is our future. In addition to improving productivity, new jobs for young people will be secured by this forward-thinking investment. The industrial strategy is brand-new but it will move forward, and as it gains traction, it will also be a player in securing youth employment.
On education, there are more than 1.9 million pupils in “good” or “outstanding” schools, which lead to better employment opportunities. Although Scotland used to have an education system that was the envy of the world, there is still work to do to revive Scotland’s education. The Government are on the case and I am sure that they will succeed, as education is absolutely vital.

However, despite the slashing of 150,000 places, Scottish colleges are doing extremely well. They are working well in partnerships with industry. In my area, Ayrshire colleges have worked well with the aeronautics industry around Prestwick airport, which is in a neighbouring constituency. They supply the young people for apprenticeships in the aviation or avionics industries.

More young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are attending university; Scotland still has some way to go on that, but it is pushing forward in that area. Many of those young people are the first in their family to secure a degree, which opens up new opportunities for them. My youngest daughter is among them—how proud I was on the day that she received a degree.

The number of children in workless households is at a 20-year low. That must be applauded, because it means that children see the opportunities and benefits that hard work brings to that household. They can take that opportunity forward in their own lives.

Stephen Kerr: Does my hon. Friend agree that perhaps there should be some kind of celebration associated with the completion of an apprenticeship, on the same scale as a graduation?

Bill Grant: Yes—as a late starter at school, I think we need to celebrate the success of those in apprenticeships. I left school with zero qualifications, but I find myself speaking in Westminster. The journey can be a bit tougher, but I would welcome that sort of initiative.

What I am setting out are not promises or pledges on a political platform or pamphlet, but the facts, and the policy successes of this Conservative Government—a Government who have ensured, and will continue to ensure, that every child or young person in the United Kingdom has the opportunity to get on in life, no matter their background.

Hugh Gaffney: The hon. Gentleman has talked a lot about the promises and the future in education, and so on. What children need in life is the real living wage, which should be £10 an hour; a real start in life; and social housing for young ones.

Bill Grant: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. Although it is a modest increase, I recall that the Budget raised the living wage by around 4% or 5%, which is helpful although it may not meet what we aspire to. My hon. Friend the Member for Paisley said that she was young once; my memory goes all the way back to my first salary. Our wage was £5—not per hour, but for five days a week. We have moved on somewhat. The moral of the story is, for a higher wage, stick at school.

Finally, I wish the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) every success in running for UK city of culture. Hopefully, Paisley will be pulled out of the hat today. I wish it well as a Scottish town and I am sure that success in that will also lead to enhancements in youth employment.

10.26 am

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) on initiating a thoroughly brilliant debate.

I stand here with some embarrassment, as the product of three universities, and stand shoulder to shoulder with my hon. Friend in a party that really believes in opportunity and matching those opportunities to the individual. That is a very important point to make. I stand here with some embarrassment also because in my constituency, the number of youth unemployed receiving jobseeker’s allowance or universal credit was 25 according to the November figures. That is 25 people across the whole of the constituency, under the age of 24, who were unemployed. I want to look briefly at some of the reasons for that figure. We have discussed them but perhaps I can draw them together again.

This is all about apprenticeships. First, I will mention a type of apprenticeship that illustrates the point raised by my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), which is at the company DAF Trucks, the truck maker in my constituency. It has established an academic relationship with a university just outside Bristol, and it celebrates the granting of those apprenticeships as if it were the granting of degrees. It is absolutely brilliant that they have done that.

Secondly, there are apprenticeships with semi-government organisations. Examples in my constituency include the work being done at the Culham Centre for Fusion Energy, in electrical training apprenticeships, and at the UK Atomic Energy Authority, which has been running apprenticeships on site for 12 years. I have become very involved with them in the sort of apprenticeships that they run. Thirdly, there are the type of apprenticeships that companies themselves sort out. A very good example in my constituency is the furniture maker StuartBarr, which has organised apprenticeships for a number of young people.

There is a difference in the way in which different schools approach apprenticeships. Some schools have gone out of their way to establish good relationships with business, but others still see going to university as the prime reason for the school. They do their children no favours at all in pursuing that line.

Fourthly, there are apprenticeships in genuine government organisations, such as prisons, which I mentioned in my intervention, where there is an incentive to get purposeful living out of prisoners to ensure that they do not reoffend. The use of apprenticeships there can be quite helpful.

The thing that all those types of apprenticeship have in common is hard work. They are not easy to run. They are not easy for students to undergo—and nor should they be, because this is about getting the skills for a future in life. We MPs can play an enormous role by encouraging apprenticeships and by talking to businesses and explaining the motivation behind the Government programmes that support apprenticeships.
Leo Docherty: My hon. Friend makes his point very eloquently. Does he agree that the link between business and education establishments is really important? Industry knows what it wants, and if it tells educational establishments what it wants, people will study for apprenticeships with enthusiasm because they know that they will be employed meaningfully at the end. We have had tremendous success with Farnborough College of Technology, which speaks directly to industry in Farnborough. Does he agree that that link is critical to the success of this model?

John Howell: I totally agree that that link is essential. An example in my constituency is Henley College, which has good networks of relationships and runs apprenticeship programmes that businesses actually want and can deliver for the students who take them. That is a crucial point. It would be pointless to offer apprenticeships that just float about in space and give no benefit at all to the people who take them. We want high-quality apprenticeships that deliver for everyone. Apprenticeships need to be win-win for both the academic organisation and the business. From my experience, that is perfectly achievable.

10.31 am

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I warmly commend the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) on opening the debate. She spoke inspiringly about her experience and background.

I had not planned to, but I want to talk about my own career path. I am proud to be a Cranhill boy who was elected to the House of Commons. I am pretty unusual, in so far as I did not go to university and I did not study politics. I left school at 16. The hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) mentioned that we need to recognise that there is an interest as I am a product of that—and I pay tribute to my family who has ever been to university is my wife—she and the business. From my experience, that is perfectly achievable.

David Linden: I want to touch on apprenticeships. I am very proud that the SNP Scottish Government are delivering 30,000 apprenticeships each year—I should probably declare an interest as I am a product of that—and I pay tribute to them for that. However, we must pay people who do apprenticeships a real living wage. I was very disappointed that, in the Budget two weeks ago, the national minimum wage for apprentices went from £3.50—which is pretty pitiful—to £3.70. I appreciate that not every company will pay that basic rate, but it is pretty disgraceful. Members have mentioned the national living wage. I am afraid that the national living wage that the UK Government talk about is a con trick, because it does not apply to under-25s. I am more than happy to give way to anyone who wants to correct that. If we are genuinely serious about building a country that works for everyone, it has to work for under-25s, too. I very much hope that the Minister will feed that back.

Stephen Kerr: Does the hon. Gentleman think the levy should be used to contribute to apprentices’ wages?

David Linden: Not necessarily. We need to understand that a fair day’s work deserves a fair day’s pay. I am not sure that we should take that from the levy. If we are serious about treating people equally, we need to do so when it comes to pay, too.

I want to pay tribute to one of the colleges in my constituency. The hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) mentioned that we need to recognise that there is a role for apprenticeships. I tend to take the view that if your pipes burst at home, you do not necessarily want a lawyer or an accountant; you want a plumber. Sometimes I think that Governments of all colours have been a bit obsessed with the idea of just churning out people with university degrees. It is important to understand that we have a diverse economy. That is why I am glad to commend Glasgow Kelvin College, which has successfully invested more in graduate-level apprentices.
The hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire mentioned colleges. The reality is that the SNP Scottish Government have stuck to their manifesto commitment to provide 116,000 college places; I very much welcome that. On the number of people from deprived backgrounds who go on to university, UCAS figures show that, despite a small decrease in the number of acceptances among people from the 60% most deprived backgrounds, the number of acceptances is still 3% higher than it was in 2015. I very much commend that.

I am conscious of the time—I certainly did not intend to speak for this long—so I will close by congratulating the hon. Member for Chichester on securing this excellent debate. I hope that this is not the end of the conversation about how we help youth employment.

10.38 am

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I congratulate the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) on securing this debate on such a vital issue. Finding a first job is part of a young person’s passage into adulthood. It is important that young people get the education and training they need and make the transition into employment smoothly, without spending a long period out of work.

At first sight, the youth employment statistics look like good news. Unemployment among young people has been falling, as has unemployment generally, and the Government have set a target of 3 million new apprenticeships by 2020. In the period July to September 2017, the unemployment rate for 16 to 24-year-olds not in full-time education was 10.3%, compared with 11.7% a year ago. However, youth unemployment remains much higher than unemployment among the working-age population as a whole, which according to the latest figures is 4.3%.

If we look more closely at the picture, we see further causes for concern. Some 12.3% of 16 to 24-year-olds were not in education, employment or training in the second quarter of 2017. That figure is even higher in some places and among certain groups.

A survey by Impetus Private Equity Foundation’s youth job index in June 2017 estimated that 1.18 million young people were not in education, employment or training for six months or more. In addition, the number of young people spending 12 months or more not in education, employment or training increased from 714,000 last year to 811,000 this year. That can have an extremely negative impact on a young person’s mental and physical health and their future employment prospects. About 5% of 16 to 17-year-olds, for example, are not in education, employment or training, despite the requirement that all young people to be in education or training until they reach the age of 18. A significant number of people—290,000 at the last count—are therefore slipping through the net. I would be interested to hear what the Government plan to do to address that.

The proportion of young people who are not in education, employment or training is about 15% in Yorkshire and Humberside. The Social Mobility Commission’s “State of the Nation” report, published last week, highlighted that some affluent areas such as West Berkshire, the Cotswolds and Crawley are among the worst for offering good education and employment opportunities for their most disadvantaged residents. Some young people can be caught in a cycle between being in and out of employment, education or training, which again can have long-term consequences for their earnings, employment, health and wellbeing.

It is extremely difficult to estimate accurately the number of young people not in education, employment or training in the UK, and the numbers may be much higher than the official figures. Evidence from London and Manchester youth talent match programmes suggests a significant number of hidden NEETs, as they are referred to. London Youth’s talent match found that 35% of its intake from January 2014 to December 2016 were people who could be said to be hidden NEETs. Talent match is funded by the Big Lottery Fund and the European social fund. While the Government have guaranteed funding agreed up to the point of Brexit, there is a question of where funding will come from after that. I should be grateful if the Minister would respond on that point.

How do the Government plan to ensure that those hidden young people are found and given the support that they need? That was once a local authority responsibility but, due to financial pressures, many local authorities have reduced youth services and do not track the whereabouts of the local youth population.

People in certain groups are especially likely to be not in education, employment or training. The proportion of 16 to 24-year-olds not employed or in training or education was higher for some ethnic groups than others: for example, it was highest for those from Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds, at 16%. Thirty per cent of young disabled people are not in education, employment or training, nor are 40% of care leavers aged 19 to 21, compared with 14% of all 19 to 21-year-olds. Those statistics should really concern us. What additional support is being put in place to ensure that those young people are given the same opportunities to progress as other young people?

Last week, the Government launched a new strategy to support disabled people into finding work, “Improving lives: the future of work, health and disability.” However, the Work and Health programme is a much smaller scheme than the Work programme and Work Choice. Overall, there will be an 80% reduction in specialist employment support from the Government—most employment support for disabled people is provided by Jobcentre Plus, but it has adopted a generalist model for work coaches rather than one where they specialise in specific kinds of claimants. The Work and Health programme is targeted at people who are likely to be able to find work within 12 months with much more specialist support. However, the reality is that, for young people with the greatest barriers to finding work, it may take much longer. The Big Lottery Fund’s talent match scheme, aimed at young people who are furthest from the jobs market, has found that it can take up to two years for the people they work with to find employment. It is important that specialist support continues as well once someone starts a job, so that they can continue in it.

We also need to consider those young people more generally who are registered as unemployed and who, with the closure of the Work programme, will be
increasingly likely to receive employment support directly from Jobcentre Plus. Some of the same problems with the way that Jobcentre Plus operates in relation to people with specific needs apply to young people more widely. Jobcentre Plus has adopted a generalist model for work coaches, but supporting young people to find employment may require more specific knowledge of the job market and skills.

The Select Committee on Work and Pensions, in its “Employment opportunities for young people” report, published at the end of March, suggested that the DWP might look at recruiting people with experience as youth workers or coaches. It also suggested that the DWP could learn from schemes such as the MyGo employment service in Suffolk, which operates from modern, open buildings that are more welcoming than many jobcentres. In fact, it is open to young people regardless of whether they are claiming benefits or not.

I have spoken in a number of debates in this Chamber to oppose the Government’s programme of jobcentre closures. Will the Minister tell us what consideration the Government have given to using the end of their contract with Trillium to renovate the estate and provide jobcentres with a much better experience for users, rather than simply closing the numbers of offices? Will he also tell us what consideration the DWP has given to the use of texts and social media to reach out to young people who are unemployed, and whether texts are used to remind them of appointments—as is done for NHS appointments—at all jobcentres, decreasing the risk of sanctions?

As the full service of universal credit is being rolled out, those young people who are registered as unemployed will receive support through the youth obligation, which will mean an intensive support programme from day one of their claim. Young people who remain out of work for six months will be expected to apply for an apprenticeship or traineeship, or take up a work placement. There is anecdotal evidence, however, from organisations in the field that delivery of the youth obligation is patchy, and that some work coaches do not know what it is. Will the Minister give us the DWP assessment of how effective the youth obligation has been so far?

The Work and Pensions Committee highlighted evidence from concerns from employers about compulsory work placements. Will the DWP ensure that the Work programme’s rigid approach to placements is not repeated? In particular, will it ensure that there is flexibility in the youth obligation for young people, especially those facing the greatest barriers, so that, where necessary, steps to prepare for employment may be given priority rather than a placement? I think here of basic skills such as literacy, numeracy and IT skills, as well as other steps, perhaps to improve social skills and build self-confidence.

It is clear from the “State of the Nation” report that the unequal opportunities that young people face have roots in the poverty and inequality they experience as they grow up. In the north-east and south-west, young people on free school meals are half as likely to start a high-level apprenticeship. The Government’s target of 3 million new apprenticeships by 2020 is laudable but, in the first quarter following the introduction of the levy in April this year, there was a 59% fall in apprenticeship starts, and the majority of starts were at higher levels for older workers. What will the Government do to ensure that young people under the age of 24 do not lose out as a result of businesses using the levy to upskill their existing workforce and recruit staff at level 4 apprenticeships?

Beneath the apparently improving youth employment figures lies a more complex story. Evidence from specialist organisations suggests that there are schemes that are working well and producing results for young people with the greatest barriers to finding work. Those young people need support tailored to their specific situation and experience but also time for that support to make a difference. I hope the Government are listening.

10.47 am

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): What a great pleasure it is to see you once again in the Chair in Westminster Hall, Mrs Moon. I congratulate my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), on bringing this important debate to Westminster Hall. I know how important youth employment is to her, and it is important for us to have opportunities to debate it. We are all grateful to her. That is reflected in the attendance—we have had eight full speeches and this is the ninth. Seventeen Members have taken part in the debate, reflecting its importance. I also welcome the opportunity to set out the targeted support and reforms to vocational education we are implementing to give every young person the best start—an ambition we will achieve only with the help of employers large and small. We need businesses to be prepared to take a chance and offer more young people, whatever their background, valuable work experience and vocational training.

We have already made significant progress on youth unemployment. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) reminded us, youth unemployment is down by 422,000 since 2010. Youth unemployment is now at a record low: just 4.8% of under-25s are both unemployed and not in full-time education, and the UK now has the second-highest youth employment rate in the G7.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chichester reminded us of the reality of youth unemployment in some other countries, using her experience from Spain as an example. Around one in 10 16 to 24-year-olds are not in employment, education or training. While some of those have actively made a decision to take some time out before starting a career, others struggle to overcome complex barriers and multiple setbacks or have had their expectations and ambitions damaged, in turn damaging their confidence. The Government are committed to encouraging young people to be in education, training or employment and giving them the chance to progress and achieve. That is critical if we are to improve productivity, promote intergenerational fairness and tackle poverty and disadvantage.

The right support in school is critical, and if young people are to make the best choices at school, good advice is essential. It is important to widen children’s expectations, and broaden their understanding of the range of jobs and career opportunities available. My hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) spoke about the importance of social capital, and if there is an absence of that, the role of the school becomes even more important when trying to fill that gap. My right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) spoke about the
importance of getting companies and industry into schools to present their opportunities directly, and I could not agree with him more. Some industry programmes, such as Feeding Britain’s Future, seek to widen people’s understanding of the range of careers in those industries, and STEM ambassadors talk about where people can get to if they knuckle down and do their maths and physics, including things like engineering, an apprenticeship or a degree.

To help young people make decisions about their future, we have introduced Jobcentre Plus support for schools. Working in partnership with the Careers & Enterprise Company and professional careers advisers, Jobcentre Plus advisers in schools help young people in a variety of ways. They set up work experience opportunities, offer advice on the local labour market, CV writing and interview techniques, and promote vocational routes into employment. We are also reforming the post-16 skills system and introducing T-levels. Employers want young people to have better vocational skills, and we want everyone to recognise that a technical education is as valuable as the traditional academic route for a successful career. We must keep pace if we are to drive the benefits to the UK economy: an estimated 1.2 million new technical and digitally skilled people are needed by 2022 if we are to compete globally. The Government are embarking on a major reform of the post-16 skills system in England, focusing particularly on technical education and lifelong learning.

My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) spoke of the high reputation of Chichester College, of which I am aware. She also spoke about her own experience, and what a great illustration her story is of where an apprenticeship can take someone. We have invested more in apprenticeships than any previous Government, and by 2020 we will have increased annual apprenticeship funding in England to £2.45 billion—double what it was in 2010. There have been 3.5 million apprenticeship starts of all ages since May 2010, and 1.1 million apprenticeship starts in England since May 2015.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chichester spoke of the importance of quality apprenticeships. He is absolutely right, and the Institute for Apprenticeships spoke about the importance of quality apprenticeships. FES in Stirling has set up its own training academy and is working in partnership with Forth Valley College. What more can the Government do to encourage more businesses to take that progressive attitude to investing in their talent?

As my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire reminded us, too many young people leave school without a place in further education or training, or an apprenticeship or job to go to. To tackle that head on, in April we introduced a new programme of intensive support for unemployed 18 to 21-year-olds who were making a claim to universal credit full service. The programme starts with a 71-hour curriculum of workshops and exercises that encourages them to think more broadly about their skills and job goals. It helps them to identify any training they need, and supports them to improve their job search, job application and interview skills.

Young people also receive intensive work-focused coaching, and referral to additional support drawn from a wide variety of locally available provision. That provision is tailored to address specific needs and can include mental health support, employability skills, basic skills training in maths, English and IT, work-related skills training, mentoring, and a short work experience opportunity. We anticipate that many young people who receive that valuable intensive support will move quickly into further education, vocational training, an apprenticeship, or a job. Those who are still unemployed after five months on that programme will have an extended stock-take assessment to review their learning and progress, and identify additional barriers to work that need to be addressed quickly. At six months, if the individuals remain unemployed, they will be offered a sector-based work academy placement, which is a short period of vocational training, and work experience in a sector with a high number of vacancies, or encouraged to take up a traineeship. Every 18 to 21-year-old on the programme who does not take up work-related training will be offered a three-month work experience placement to help them achieve their job goals.

Universal credit also offers, for the first time, in-work support for young people on a low income to help them progress in work. Young people are better off in work under universal credit. Most young people were not entitled to claim working tax credit until they were 25, but under universal credit they continue to receive benefits while in work and on a low income.

The rate of the national minimum wage for young people is a balance. It is, of course, important to ensure that people are properly remunerated, but we must also protect their employment prospects. The rate for people aged 18 to 24 has risen by between 7% and 8% since 2015, and from April 2018 the apprenticeship rate will be at a record high in real terms. Overall, the national living wage—such a key reform—has meant that the lowest-earning 5% of the population have recently had the biggest rise in their annual incomes since records began.

The hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) asked about our use of texts and other forms of communication. Yes, we absolutely use those things in jobcentres these days. It is an important part of our communication.

As our industrial strategy set out, we need to boost productivity and earning power across the country, improve the quality of work and ensure that everyone has the right skills to progress. As I hope my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester will agree, when businesses give a young person a chance of employment or the valuable opportunity of work experience, it is not only the job-specific skills that they gain that make a
difference. Through work experience, young people broaden their horizons, learn how to work with others and gain confidence. That in itself can be instrumental in changing their job opportunities and life chances.

Employers say that one key reason why they do not employ young people is a lack of work experience, so getting that experience is important. If any Member has difficulty with putting local employers in touch with jobcentres and creating those work experience placements, they should get in touch with me and I will help to facilitate that. This is such an important subject, and I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate. This is a partnership approach between the Government, MPs and educational employers.

10.58 am

Gillian Keegan: Our performance in youth employment is strong, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) said, this is a good news story. That news is especially welcome when compared with our European neighbours. That is not an accident, but the result of the right policies, and we must not take it for granted. Improving school standards, high-quality apprenticeships, investment in tech and digital skills, and high-quality colleges and universities, all working more collaboratively with business—that model is working, but we still have more to do to ensure that all young people have a decent future, and not a future on benefits. Labour Members talk about benefits a lot, but for young people that is not the workplace. I thank all hon. Members for taking part in this debate, and I look forward to working together to increase opportunities and earnings for young people today and in the future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered youth employment.

South Middlesbrough: Traffic Congestion

11.1 am

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered traffic congestion in south Middlesbrough.

It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to debate the Marton crawl. Contrary to what people might think, at the time of year when “Strictly Come Dancing” is all over the news, that is not our local equivalent of the Lambeth walk or the Harlem shake. It is the name that has been awarded over decades to the two-mile stretch of the A172 that runs due south from James Cook University Hospital to the top of Dixons Bank in Marton, Middlesbrough. It comprises Marton Road, Stokesley Road and Dixons Bank, and is the traffic bottleneck to end all bottlenecks. It is the source of misery for thousands of my constituents every day.

The A172 is the principal route in and out of Middlesbrough town centre from the south of the town, and it serves almost all the wards in the Middlesbrough South section of my constituency—Nunthorpe, Marton West, Marton East, Stainton and Thornton, Hemlington, Ladgate and Coulby Newham, as well as the small towns and villages of East Cleveland, for which Middlesbrough is the nearest urban centre, and the place where many residents work. The route is also used by people coming in from places such as Great Ayton and Stokesley, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak), where the same logic applies.

I propose to take the Minister on a virtual journey along the Marton crawl, so that he can picture the situation for himself. The A172 is largely a single-track road, with some short exceptions where it widens to two lanes. Heading out of town the congestion really starts to bite outside the excellent James Cook Hospital. That is a 1,024-bed major tertiary referral hospital, which houses the regional major trauma centre. As can be imagined, it is a scene of well-nigh constant activity, with ambulances racing to and from A&E and thousands of vehicles carrying staff, patients and visitors to and from the car parks. Middlesbrough Council estimates that approximately a quarter of all the traffic on the Marton crawl relates to the hospital in some way. The junction where cars pull in and out of the hospital site is the first point where traffic starts to build up, and the second follows a few hundred metres on, where the A172 crosses the east-west axis of Ladgate Lane.

After passing over that junction, the road runs up the side of the busy Stewart Park, the treasured green space that houses the Captain Cook Birthplace Museum and the exciting new Askham Bryan College, which I opened earlier this autumn. By that point the traffic is properly nose to tail. I know it well, because I grew up just beyond Stewart Park on the Grove, in Marton. Since 1984 I have spent more time sitting in that section of the crawl than I have any wish to think about. Passing Marton cricket club on the right, traffic next comes to the old Marton hotel and country club, which, sadly, closed in October.

I will stop the metaphorical car here, and get out for a moment. The country club site is a big one; the hotel was large and sprawling, and accompanied by a sizeable
car and coach park. It would be a prime target for housing developers. I want to repeat here what I told Middlesbrough Council in a letter last month: that it would be unthinkable for new homes there to be approved until the Marton crawl is resolved. New houses are the last thing that residents want at the country club site, and should any such plans be put forward I will oppose them fiercely. One of the main reasons is that the moment someone leaves the country club, they hit the slip road on to the main dual carriageway running out to the coast and Teesport, the A174. It is an immensely busy interchange, particularly at rush hour, and cars often back up right down the slip road as they attempt to get on to the A172 and the crawl itself. The fact that vehicles sometimes end up tailing back almost on to the Parkway, a 70-mph road, is a safety risk and suggests how congested the Marton crawl is at that point.

At that point, a journey may well have taken plenty long enough, but the worst pinch point is yet to come. It comes in the form of Captain Cook Primary School and the adjacent Marton Shops, a 1960s shopping parade that houses lots of well loved local stores. Traffic parking for the school drop-off and pick-up, and queuing to enter the shops, forms a huge blockage serving to inflame the entire route. Once that is escaped, the final leg of the crawl winds up Dixons Bank to the A172’s crossroads with Stainton Way in front of the popular Southern Cross pub. That junction was redesigned, badly, a few years ago, to replace the existing roundabout. The roundabout seemed to allow traffic to move more freely. The current lights, with only one lane heading south, are not helping the situation. Only once someone is over the crossroads do they escape, out towards the countryside. However, of course they know that they will face the same set of problems in reverse when they head back into Middlesbrough.

That is the reason why I have campaigned since before my election for action to be taken to tackle the Marton crawl. Local people agree. This summer I received more than 800 replies, representing more than 1,000 people, to the survey I ran on how the crawl affects their lives. More than half of those responding said they spend up to 20 minutes on a typical day caught in the crawl. More than half of those responding said they spend half an hour or more. Spending over 800 replies, representing more than 1,000 people, to the survey I ran on how the crawl affects their lives. More than half of those responding said they spend up to 20 minutes on a typical day caught in the crawl. More than half of those responding said they spend half an hour or more. More than half of those responding said they spend up to 20 minutes on a typical day caught in the crawl. More than half of those responding said they spend half an hour or more. More than half of those responding said they spend up to 20 minutes on a typical day caught in the crawl. More than half of those responding said they spend half an hour or more. More than half of those responding said they spend up to 20 minutes on a typical day caught in the crawl. More than half of those responding said they spend half an hour or more.

Mr Hopson continued:

“It would be interesting to know the level of air pollution along Marton Road—where there are two primary schools, at least one care home and our major hospital—due to the never-ending stop start traffic.”

Mr Hopson speaks for many of us.

The frustration that people feel is so great because the problem has been developing for such a long time. A bypass scheme, known locally as the “Marton motorway”, was first mooted as far back as the 1960s, shortly after my grandparents moved to Middlesbrough. The route was proposed to run parallel to the railway from Longlands to Swans Corner in Nunthorpe, spanning land that falls within both the Middlesbrough and Redcar and Cleveland council areas. It was never developed and the Nunthorpe end of it has recently been rendered undeliverable by the building of new homes. That amounts to an unforgivable multigenerational failure of town planning by two councils, characterised by the inability to find a common way forward in the interest of local people and a lack of political willpower to drive a solution through.

In 2002, Middlesbrough’s controversial then Mayor, Ray Mallon, announced that he would solve the problem—and how could Robopac fall short?—but he was never able to deliver on that promise. Many people doubt that the Marton crawl will ever, or can ever, be gripped. After so many decades and so many false dawns, I understand why. The problem is worsening every year because so much new housing is being added in the south of Middlesbrough. It has long been seen as a very attractive place to live, with easy access to the beautiful north Yorkshire and east Cleveland countryside. I should declare an interest here in that my family and I are house-hunting in Nunthorpe at the moment—new developments have been added at an extraordinary rate in recent years.

I will be clear: those new developments are largely very handsome and bring much-needed council tax revenue into the town. However, in their pursuit of additional council tax, both my local councils, particularly Middlesbrough, have essentially ignored the impact of all that new housing on our local services and, most seriously, on our road network. I know that part of Middlesbrough better than I know almost anywhere in the world, and I can state definitively that the traffic has never been worse in my lifetime than it is today. That blind approach to permitting development regardless of the consequences is irresponsible and must stop until our roads are fit for purpose.

With all that in mind, it is beyond timely that the Government have announced their new £1 billion-a-year fund to improve or replace A roads across England. I warmly welcome the announcement, just as I welcome the word that the Secretary of State will be visiting my constituency on Friday to see the problem for himself. The departmental and ministerial team could not have been more helpful in addressing the Marton crawl, and I want the record to show how much their support is appreciated, not only by me, but by thousands of people in Middlesbrough.

While it is right that the Government are committed to delivering major transport projects of transformational national significance, great economic and social benefits can also be unlocked by resolving local road problems, and Ministers understand that. I would be grateful if the Minister, in his reply, would set out when applications to the new fund will open, what criteria will be used to...
assess their merits, what information local authorities will be asked to supply and when applicants will find out whether they have been successful. I would also appreciate it if he would agree to meet me and a delegation from Middlesbrough Council in the new year, so they can set out the plans in detail.

Those plans are in the process of being finalised. I am grateful to the officers of the council for the hard work they are devoting to drawing them up, just as I am encouraged by the way in which the council’s political leadership is now working with me on a cross-party basis to promote them. The plans include a series of redesigned junctions, as well as a new relief road from the Longlands roundabout to Ladgate Lane, which will cut out a key stretch of the crawl past the hospital and allow a second point of access to the rear of the hospital complex, which I believe will make a great deal of sense.

It is important that those plans carry the maximum level of community support. We will only have one shot at getting this right. Quite reasonably, it is an issue that arouses strong feelings, particularly where planning is concerned. I want to thank everybody who joined me at the packed Marton West Community Council a few weeks ago, and I know there will be a large turnout at the meeting this Friday night at Nunthorpe Methodist church, where I will provide an update on the latest news.

One of the key debates is over the planned redesign of the Southern Cross junction, the first element of reform proposals that has been brought forward for public consultation. Concerns have been raised about aspects of those plans, in particular whether they will simply displace some of the current traffic congestion into Coulby Newham, and whether homes on Dixon’s Bank will be blighted by access difficulties or by the removal of trees screening properties where the road will be widened.

I pay tribute to Marton West councillor Chris Hobson, who is chairing the Marton crawl steering group. Together with other local councillors, she is providing a strong voice for those affected by the proposed changes. I stand ready to raise issues with the council, and I want a solution that recognises the legitimate concerns of affected residents. With that in mind, I emphasise to Middlesbrough Council that, in the words of our EU negotiations, “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed”. Proposals should not be brought forward piecemeal, but as part of an overarching solution that can be presented to the Middlesbrough public and the Government in turn. Only if the Council brings forward a package in the round can we assess properly how the different component parts will impact the Marton crawl and interact with each other.

This is a good chance to emphasise that I believe public transport should form an integrated part of the solution. That obviously includes buses, but it is also well worth considering a park-and-ride scheme in conjunction with Northern Rail, given that the railway runs right through south Middlesbrough on its way to the main train station. Middlesbrough is unusual in being an urban conurbation where commuter and light rail is used so comparatively little. An imaginative solution would find a way forward. That would require co-operation across the local authority boundary into Redcar and Cleveland, which would be the only viable site for a park and ride, but the prize seems well worth seeking and I am ready to play my part in delivering it.

This debate has been a welcome opportunity to talk about the situation in Middlesbrough, and I am grateful for the opportunity to bring it to Parliament. My constituents have been waiting almost 50 years for a comprehensive package of improvements to be delivered. The Government’s new fund represents a suitably golden opportunity to prove that Ministers are listening, and that this Government will act where so many others have only talked. Working together with both central and local government, I am determined to do everything I can to mitigate the Marton crawl, strengthen my home town’s economy and make life a little bit easier for so many local people. If politics is the art of the possible, those goals seem distinctly achievable, and few matter more to me.

I look forward to hearing the Minister’s reply, and hope to have the opportunity to sit down with him and his officials again in the new year.

11.15 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): What a delight it is to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I want to place it on the record that I am an admirer of my right hon. Friend, or rather my hon. Friend—he is not yet right hon., but I am sure it is only a matter of time. It is wonderful to see him as—I think I am right in saying—the first Conservative Member of Parliament ever in his constituency, and the first for a long time in Middlesbrough. It is also a delight to have him speak today with the intelligence, energy and advocacy he has brought to his job. I congratulate him on that and on the powerful speech he has made.

It is a slight shame, if I may say so, that there are no Opposition Members here in this debate, no other Members of Parliament for the region and no one from the Opposition Front Bench. These are locally important issues, and my hon. Friend’s speech speaks powerfully not just to his constituency, but to the needs of the city and region as a whole. I congratulate him on that, and I think his words deserve a wider hearing. I am sure they get a wider hearing in his own council, neighbouring councils and the combined authorities, but they deserve a wider hearing from his fellow MPs.

My hon. Friend has been tireless in raising awareness of the Marton crawl, and I know he will be discussing it with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State when he visits the Tees Valley on Friday, as part of a properly choreographed process of putting the matter on the Government’s radar screen. I would also be delighted to meet my hon. Friend and a delegation of local councillors and officials in the new year, so that we can discuss some of the propositions he has made today, some of the schemes the Government are bringing forward and how those things can be brought together.

Transport, as my hon. Friend knows, is enormously valuable not merely to the Tees Valley, but to the whole of the north and the country as a whole. It is an important priority of this Government, and we agree with local partners that good transport infrastructure is essential to economic growth and social development. That is why we are investing so heavily in transport infrastructure across the north, with precisely that goal of opening up bottlenecks and delivering sustained economic growth. I hope, just as my hon. Friend gave a
virtual tour of his constituency with regard to the Marton crawl, I may be allowed to give a virtual tour of Government policy in this area before looking at specific ways in which we may be able to help him in his constituency.

The Government are committed to creating a northern powerhouse, rebalancing the economy and supporting the north in its economic and transport aspirations. That is part of the long-term goals we have set ourselves, and it is one that is widely shared across the country, certainly across the north of England. We are investing £13 billion in transport in the north precisely to advance that agenda and to connect the region, so that there can be greater pooling of strength and greater economic development.

To that end, we have created Transport for the North to develop and drive forward the transport plans that are central to local needs, and we are taking legislation through Parliament, as my hon. Friend will be aware, that should see Transport for the North established as the first of the statutory sub-national transport bodies from 1 April 2018, with a key role in advising Government on the north’s priorities for rail and road investment.

The Tees Valley is a key part of the northern powerhouse and has a major contribution to make in building a stronger economy. It is a region of 660,000 people, a renowned industrial centre with major global companies such as ConocoPhillips, Huntsman, Mitsubishi and others operating there. Of course, through the devolution deal, we now have Ben Houchen in place as the first directly elected Mayor of Tees Valley, with more autonomy and control to drive forward the economic transformation as a whole that the area needs.

Getting the right road infrastructure in place will be a crucial part of that transformation. I am taking another step in my virtual tour, as we zero in on the road transport needs of the local economy. That is why the Government are investing record amounts of money in improving and maintaining highways across the country, to help motorists. That includes £15 billion on our strategic road network and, crucially, £5 billion for local schemes through the local growth fund historically. That is designed to improve growth, support communities and the wider economy and inhibit the effects of the congestion that comes with economic development.

Much of that funding is not ring-fenced, and therefore it is for local authorities to determine how best to use it, based on their needs and priorities. In the current spending review period, we have allocated a total of £6.1 billion to local highways maintenance between 2015 and 2021, and £1.5 billion through the integrated spending review period, we have allocated a total of £185 million of that fund was allocated to local highway authorities by formula in the present financial year, so that work on the ground could be started quickly. Within Tees Valley, it was agreed that the funding would be used to improve the area’s key route network, by delivering local interventions on the A66 and its connecting routes to improve the strategic connection between the A1(M) and Teesport. The Government allocated a further £244 million through a competitive bidding round. In Tees Valley, that has supported three schemes, with funding of more than £8 million, including £3 million to Middlesbrough Council for the A66 and A171 cargo fleet roundabout scheme to improve access to the port, and £2 million for Redcar and Cleveland Council to remove a congestion bottleneck at the A171 Swans Corner roundabout in my hon. Friend’s constituency.

The Government recognise that local areas can have strategic priorities that require funding beyond the scope of their local growth fund allocations to deliver. We are getting closer to the nub—the central roundabout, if I can put it that way—of my hon. Friend’s speech. That is why we set up our large local majors programme to enable local areas to develop and bring forward proposals for very large schemes. In Tees Valley, we have provided development funding for the combined authority to work up business cases for two of its strategic road schemes: the north Darlington bypass, to provide a better route to the A1 and release land for housing; and a second Tees crossing, to relieve congestion on both the A19 and the local road network. Those are likely to be very large schemes, so we will need to see rigorous business cases—I emphasise that they need to be rigorous—from the combined authority before considering whether they are able to proceed.

It is not just local roads that require investment. We are taking action on the strategic road network as well. The present road investment strategy outlines how we are investing in the strategic road network until 2021. In total, we are investing something like £15 billion in more than 100 major schemes, and that significant investment is being used to develop major new schemes, as well as to support asset renewal and maintenance.

We are taking a much longer-term approach to the acknowledgment, understanding and maintenance of our assets, and that is reflected in all the investments we make. Within Highways England’s Yorkshire and north-east area, which includes the Tees Valley, we are investing £1.4 billion in new road schemes. That includes a major new scheme on the A19 in the Tees Valley—the Norton to Wynyard scheme—that will benefit local residents and businesses by relieving congestion and improving journey times. Both carriageways will be widened to provide three traffic lanes, and the replacement of the road surface is designed to reduce road traffic noise. The scheme will promote local growth and allow new developments to be brought forward in the Tees Valley area.

The Government have recognised the importance of good connectivity and accessibility to improving productivity by providing additional funding through the national productivity investment fund, for all the reasons we have described. The first £185 million of that fund was allocated to local highway authorities by formula in the present financial year, so that work on the ground could be started quickly. Within Tees Valley, it was agreed that the funding would be used to improve the area’s key route network, by delivering local interventions on the A66 and its connecting routes to improve the strategic connection between the A1(M) and Teesport. The Government allocated a further £244 million through a competitive bidding round. In Tees Valley, that has supported three schemes, with funding of more than £8 million, including £3 million to Middlesbrough Council for the A66 and A171 cargo fleet roundabout scheme to improve access to the port, and £2 million for Redcar and Cleveland Council to remove a congestion bottleneck at the A171 Swans Corner roundabout in my hon. Friend’s constituency.

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The scheme will complement two earlier Highways Agency pinch-point schemes at the Wolviston interchange and the A174 Parkway junction on the A19, and will smooth the way along the entire route. The Norton to Wynyard scheme is currently under development and is still on track to meet the committed start-of-works date of March 2020.

As my hon. Friend said, a very important part of this is sustainable and public transport. That needs to be a crucial part of the way that not just Middlesbrough but all our cities and potentially rural areas think about the change to a genuinely multi-modal transport system of the 21st century. I want to talk about that in some more detail and the priority we place on encouraging people to get out of their cars and take the train or bus, and to cycle or walk.

I was pleased to learn that the Department has provided funding for the new station at James Cook Hospital on the Marton Road, as my hon. Friend acknowledged, which opened in 2015. We also provided £37 million towards the Tees Valley bus network scheme—an innovative package of bus lanes, junction improvements and improved passenger information systems that was also completed in 2015. More recently, the combined authority has taken forward a programme of schemes using local growth funding to support public transport, cycling and walking. Last year, the Department awarded the combined authority £3.3 million for its “Connect Tees Valley” project, to increase the number of children travelling sustainably to school. We are providing technical support to help the authority to develop a local cycling and walking infrastructure plan. Through those initiatives, I hope that people will be encouraged to consider other options for travelling into Middlesbrough and across the region.

I hope I have reassured my hon. Friend that the Government are supporting the growth of the Tees Valley by providing investment to improve connectivity across the area and beyond. We continue to bring forward new initiatives that may address some of the problems he has described. In the Budget the week before last, the Chancellor announced a new £1.7 billion fund to improve intra-city transport with projects that drive productivity by improving connectivity, reducing congestion and using new mobility services and technology. The transforming cities fund is part of our commitment to place cities and city regions at the heart of the industrial strategy. Half of the funding is being allocated to the six combined authorities with elected metro Mayors on a per capita basis. That means that Tees Valley will receive £59 million over the four years between 2018-19 and 2021-22. We are aiming to say more about the fund shortly, but the intention is that it will empower the Mayor to take strategic decisions about the interventions he wants, very much along the lines that my hon. Friend described.

My hon. Friend mentioned the major road network. As the Government announced in the transport investment strategy, we have accepted the case made in the Rees Jeffreys report of October 2016 to give special recognition to the most strategically important local authority roads. The major road network will receive dedicated funding from the national roads fund. We will consult on our proposals for the creation of the MRN before the end of this year. The consultation will consider all the questions that my hon. Friend raised, such as how we define the MRN, how we plan for investment in it, how schemes are brought forward for funding and the timetable.

It is too early to say whether the routes we have discussed today would be eligible for MRN funding, but I urge my hon. Friend and all those who support the powerful agenda for change in transport in south Middlesbrough that he has advocated to put forward their views through the consultation process and to continue to make the case with all the force he has brought to the debate and the wider initiative. I hope I have been able to demonstrate the Government’s commitment to improving connectivity, and I thank my hon. Friend for his energetic and timely intervention.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.
Palestinian Communities: Israeli Demolitions

[MARK PRITCHARD in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the effect of Israeli demolitions on Palestinian communities.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. Before beginning the debate in earnest, I will make clear a couple of things, which I hope will ensure that this and subsequent debates can proceed in a constructive manner.

First, nothing that I or, I hope, others will say is about religion or ethnicity. This is not an issue of Arab, Muslim or Jewish people. It is about upholding our basic values of justice and human rights, and it is about holding to account those states, Governments and duty bearers that violate those principles and laws. While the debate will, of course, discuss Israeli Government policies, with regard to the demolitions, this is not about being pro-Israel or pro-Palestine; it is about being pro-justice and pro-human rights. At a time when there seems to be a growing number of countries facing conflict, upheaval and political uncertainty, it is not a question of which is more important to talk about—they are all important.

Palestine has been in a perpetual—some would say declining—state of all of the above for more than 50 years. Indeed, the Israel-Palestine conflict is one of the most protracted in the world.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. On the issue of decline, does he agree that, in the three years since that particular aspect of the conflict ended, conditions are actually getting worse in the Gaza strip? Many constituents have contacted me about that declining humanitarian situation. We need to redouble our efforts internationally to tackle it.

Stephen Kinnock: I agree, and I point to a recent UN report, which declared that Gaza will be “unliveable” by 2020 due to the degrading infrastructure there, which is degrading for reasons that we know well. My hon. Friend is absolutely right on that point.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is very generous in giving way. On the comments he has just made, does he accept that Hamas recently rebuilding the terrorist tunnels can regrettably only make the prospect of peace recede even more?

Stephen Kinnock: I agree that fault can be allocated on all sides of this conflict. The point I make—I hope to illustrate it further during my speech—is that Israel holds the whip hand in this situation; it is in its gift to make some progress and move forward. It is important to see the balance of the relationship in that context.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend think that the encroachment on Palestinian lands, the demolitions and the sanctions on the Palestinians are leading to a situation in which a two-state solution may not be viable any more?

Stephen Kinnock: I personally remain absolutely committed to the two-state solution, but I recognise, as I will set out in my speech, that there has been a 600% increase in settlements in the illegally occupied territories in the west bank. It becomes increasingly difficult to see how a two-state solution could work with that level of occupation taking place.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate and on his considered comments. Does this not underline the importance of people in positions of influence taking a measured response? The comments that the President of the United States will make later this afternoon, in which he will recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, are therefore highly regrettable and highly dangerous.

Stephen Kinnock: The hon. Gentleman may well have seen a draft of my speech, because I was about to come on to that very point. The expected announcement later today by the President of the United States on recognising Jerusalem as the capital of Israel has sent shockwaves across the world. If that announcement happens, it may well be the death knell for any prospective peace process. However, I will talk a bit more about the changing facts on the ground, and what that means for peace, in a while.

The second point I make on the framing of the debate is that I want to be as clear as possible that I am deeply ashamed of the fact that, due to the actions, views and behaviour of a minority of persons in my party, a perception has grown that Labour has a problem with anti-Semitism. I have no truck whatsoever with anyone who expresses or excuses anti-Semitic views, and any member of the Labour party—or any party, for that matter—who does should be expelled as fast as possible. That applies whoever they are, be they the former Mayor of one of the great cities of the world, someone who has just delivered some leaflets or an otherwise inactive member. If they are an anti-Semite, or a defender or excuser of anti-Semites, they are not welcome in our party. They never have been and they never will be.

Mrs Ellman: My hon. Friend is very generous in giving way again. In relation to his comments, how does he view the statements from Labour members who claim that allegations of anti-Semitism are simply smears against the leader of the Labour party?

Stephen Kinnock: We need to remain absolutely clear that anything that looks to defend, excise or promote anything that could be remotely perceived as anti-Semitism must be treated as grounds for expulsion from the party. We need to hold very true to that principle.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): On that point, it has to be recognised that the people of Israel would gain from a solution and peace and from not having to expend so much energy, and the energy of their young people, on security. They need to be able to move forward. This is not only about a solution for the people of Palestine; it is also about a solution for the people of Israel.

Stephen Kinnock: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. There can be no peace without security and there can be no security without peace. That rule applies universally.
With that in mind, I hope that we can have a constructive debate, finding common ground and advancing the cause of peace, justice and security for the peoples of both Israel and Palestine.

Next year will mark 25 years since the signing of the Oslo accords. That moment was meant to represent a turning point, heralding a new and lasting era of peace and co-existence—the beginning of a genuine and complete two-state solution. However, what has a Palestinian approaching his or her 25th birthday today actually seen? An increase in the number of illegal settlers, from 258,000 to more than 600,000, despite countless international rulings that the settlements violate international law. The Oslo generation have seen nothing but the increasing fragmentation and annexation of their land.

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): I am struck by what my hon. Friend says about the situation of children and young people; it is something I saw for myself when I visited the west bank. According to the Norwegian Refugee Council, there are 55 educational facilities in Area C of the west bank with outstanding demolition orders against them. Will he join me in sending a strong message to the Israeli Government that demolishing schools is completely unacceptable and is counter to any effort to achieve peace in the region?

Stephen Kinnock: I add to my hon. Friend’s point that we in the international community have for many years been telling the people of Palestine that, with politics and constructive engagement, a solution will be found. What hope do we give to those young people in those educational establishments if that seems not to be happening?

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Stephen Kinnock: I will just make a little more progress and then I will give way.

The Oslo generation have also seen 50,000 homes and properties demolished, often resulting in the forced displacement of families and entire communities, and the construction of an illegal separation barrier, which carves up the west bank and brutally disconnects towns, cities, families and communities from each other. They have also seen, for the first time in history, the separation of the historic cities of Jerusalem and Bethlehem.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): On Jerusalem and the unfortunate and misguided announcement from the US President, will my hon. Friend comment on the restatement of British policy at Prime Minister’s Question Time today that Jerusalem should not be dealt with in the way the US President suggests?

Stephen Kinnock: I thank my hon. Friend. I very much welcome the Prime Minister’s comments at Prime Minister’s questions. That was a very important restatement of very important principles. Let us just hope that she may be able to have some form of constructive conversation with the President of the United States about that, although having a constructive conversation with that particular gentleman seems to be a difficult thing to do.

Jerusalem, the city of three faiths, is under constant threat as a political pawn. There is the separation of the west bank and Gaza, with a 2 million population trapped in the tiny Gaza strip, in what some have called the world’s largest open-air prison, thanks to the land, sea and air blockade of Gaza. One third of the 2 million people crammed into Gaza’s 139 square miles are under 15, and almost half are under 25. A 10-year-old child will already have lived through three major wars. That is no way to grow up. In short, any young person born at the time of the Oslo accords has seen only diminishing rights and freedoms, less security and a fragmented territory that pushes the possibility of a two-state solution even further away.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I visited Susiya on a delegation with Caabu—the Council for Arab-British understanding—in 2015 and heard at first hand how people living there were terrified of the threat of demolition. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to redouble and intensify our efforts to stop the demolitions?

Stephen Kinnock: I thank my hon. Friend. I, too, have visited Susiya, and it is a moving experience, particularly when we see what needs to be done to avoid the risk of creating a construction that could be considered as a target for demolition. Buildings are built with tyres, for example, to avoid that position.

Paul Blomfield: I thank my hon. Friend for the way he framed the debate. Just over three weeks ago, I was in the Bedouin village of Khan al-Ahmar and took time out to see the school there. That school, built with the support of the international community and the village, faces demolition, apparently to make way for further illegal settlements, and apparently the Israelis are upping the preparations for that demolition to happen within the next few weeks. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Minister, whom I understand has also visited the village, should in his response commit to redoubling the Government’s efforts to prevent that demolition from happening?

Stephen Kinnock: I thank my hon. Friend. In my speech, I will talk about the other communities under threat of demolition. I very much look forward to hearing the Minister’s response and hope that it will not just be rhetoric and that there will be some reality in there as well.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): One of the strengths of Israel is the independence of its rule of law and the way in which the courts fearlessly impose decisions on occasions, but what is particularly tragic about the schools that are being threatened with demolition—I have seen them myself, as many other people have—is that they are in the shadow of illegal settlements. The contradiction and imbalance that exists does not help Israel and the perception of Israel in the rest of the world.

Stephen Kinnock: I thank my hon. Friend. The juxtaposition of the young people in those communities seeking to get an education with, right on their doorstep, those illegal settlements is a metaphor for the terribly challenging situation in which we find ourselves.
Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): A moment ago, my hon. Friend was talking about Gaza. Is it not the case that Israel signed an agreement on movement and access in relation to Gaza with the Palestinian Authority; gave the Palestinians control over the borders for the first time in history; allowed imports and exports; planned for the construction of a sea port and an airport; and pulled out of Gaza and removed the settlers? But Hamas took over; expelled Fatah; murdered rival Palestinians; armed itself with hundreds of thousands of rockets aimed at Israel, which were provided by Iran; and dug tunnels to attack civilians on kibbutzes? That is what happened in Gaza. What responsibility does my hon. Friend ascribe to Hamas for the situation in Gaza, and how does he think it is possible to resolve it?

Stephen Kinnock: I agree that many of the things that my hon. Friend listed have taken place, but the fact remains that there has been a land, sea and air-based blockade of the Gaza strip throughout that entire period. Gaza is now described as the largest open-air prison in the world, and the UN has declared that it will be unliveable by 2020, so there is a humanitarian crisis that has to be resolved, and it is in the gift of the Israeli Government to take that forward.

I have described the harsh reality of the facts on the ground. I met the commissioner-general of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency yesterday, and his message to the international community was clear: conflict management is not enough, and we must do more to support an actual resolution to the conflict. I agree that we cannot continue with a wait-and-see approach. Where has that got us over the last 50 years, 25 years or the 10 years of the Gaza blockade? We are where we are because of choices that have been made—choices on both sides of the conflict. Foremost among them has been the active choice to continue the expansion of illegal settlements on Palestinian territory and the forcible transfer of Palestinian families and communities from their homes. Both those policies have created a coercive environment that seeks to undermine the ability of Palestinians to continue living where they are. They are at great risk of forcible transfer, which is a clear violation of the fourth Geneva convention.

Just over a month ago, a UN report found that Israel’s role as an occupying power in the Palestinian Territories has “crossed a red line into illegality”. International law is clear. An occupying power cannot treat occupied territory as its own or make claims of sovereignty. Occupation must be temporary, and the power must act in good faith and in the best interests of the protected or occupied population. However—these are the findings of the UN and its special rapporteur—that has been the repeated pattern of behaviour of successive Israeli Governments over the 50 years of the occupation.

A central plank of the occupation and spread of settlements has been the demolitions. It is estimated that almost 50,000 Palestinian structures have been demolished since 1967, with 1,500 homes demolished in Rafah alone between 2000 and 2004. That is despite warnings in 1968 from Theodor Meron, later the president of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, that the demolitions, even on security grounds, broke international law and the fourth Geneva convention. Article 53 of that convention prohibits the destruction of private property by an occupying power, and it is unequivocal, so how do the Israeli Government respond? They respond not by denying the substance of the claims of demolition, but by claiming that Palestine is not a party to the Geneva convention because it is not a state. Astonishing! Stepping beyond the fact that the policies of the Israeli Government are the main obstacle to Palestinian statehood, that is an utterly specious argument, because a basic and fundamental principle of human rights law is that international human rights treaties apply in all areas in which a state exercises “effective control”, and the occupation clearly constitutes such control.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): My hon. Friend mentioned the UN report and international structures. Is he aware of the EU report from March of this year that condemns the fact that, over six months, 631,692-worth of EU aid structures have also been demolished? I think that last year it was 182 structures. These are meant to be for humanitarian projects. The EU has condemned the destruction of its structures, and eight countries are putting together an approach to recover the moneys. That is seen as a very blunt diplomatic move, but desperate times possibly call for desperate measures.

Stephen Kinnock: I thank my hon. Friend. We have talked about all sides losing out from what is happening on the ground, and clearly Israel is not doing itself any favours with the international community when it is destroying structures that have been built with European Union aid money.

Clearly, Palestine is treated as an exception to the laws to which I was referring. Currently, 46 Bedouin communities are at risk of forcible transfer in Area C of the west bank. Why? For the implementation of Israel’s controversial and outright illegal E1 plan, which would allow Israel to connect its mega-settlements from north to south, in effect splitting the west bank in two and cutting off Jerusalem from any further Palestinian state.

I visited one of the communities during my last visit to the region with Caabu. The residents of Khan al-Ahmar told us how they lived under constant threat of forcible transfer, not knowing when the bulldozers might arrive and raze their homes and school to the ground. A huge campaign is under way in the occupied territories right now to protect the school—the only one for miles—from demolition. While we were there, we were told how the children’s swings in the playground were uprooted because they violated Israeli planning laws. According to reports, there are at present more than 50 schools in the west bank with demolition or stop-work orders.

In August, on the eve of the new school year, the Israeli authorities requisitioned nine education-related structures in Area C and demolished a newly established kindergarten in the Bedouin community of Jabal al-Baba.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case for the importance of maintaining international humanitarian law. Does he share my concern that if these demolitions go ahead in the coming weeks, as we fear, it will be the middle of the summer holiday, potentially putting families and young children at great risk, as they could be without not just their schools and playgrounds but their homes, at a time when they will face incredible hardship and real destitution?
Stephen Kinnock: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are clearly in the midst of a potential humanitarian crisis, which may seem small-scale purely in terms of the number of children who use that school, but is potentially catastrophic for the lives of those children. We should appeal to the humanitarian instincts of all hon. Members today.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case about the day-to-day disruption of the lives of ordinary Palestinians. Does he agree with this central point—that none of this can be justified by reference to Hamas or general references to the security situation? Everybody present for this debate must agree that security is fundamental for Israel, but it should not erode the day-to-day rights of Palestinian men, women and children.

Stephen Kinnock: I thank my hon. Friend. We know that there can be no peace without security and there can be no security without peace, and we have to find a way out of this vicious circle. I believe that it is in the gift of the Israeli Government to make the progress that is so desperately required.

It seems that nothing is off limits. During August and September 2017, the Israeli authorities demolished or seized a total of 63 Palestinian-owned structures, affecting over 1,200 people, all on the grounds of lack of Israeli-issued permits, which are nearly impossible to obtain. The Supreme Court of Israel, the role of which is to protect the rule of law, has, in a peak of irony, ruled that demolitions can be carried out without any right to appeal if the Israel defence forces judge that advance warning would hinder demolition action. Accordingly, the Israeli non-governmental organisation B’Tselem has said:

“It seems that Israel is so confident in its ability to expel entire villages without incurring judicial or international criticism that it is no longer bothering to create even the illusion of legal proceedings.”

Israel is often portrayed as a lonely beacon of democracy and pluralism in the middle east. Well, it is time the Israeli Government began to live up to that, because there is nothing democratic or pluralistic about demolishing homes, community infrastructure, schools and kindergartens, and there is certainly nothing democratic or pluralistic about denying due process and undermining the rule of law.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way and I apologise for being late; I had a meeting with the Bahraini ambassador.

I was rather bemused by this debate, because although I know that the hon. Gentleman regularly speaks at the Centre for Turkey Studies, I have never heard him speak about Turkish settlers from the mainland in north Cyprus—200,000 people who invaded north Cyprus—yet he wants to talk about Israel. Should not he, and indeed some of his friends at the Centre for Turkey Studies, actually consider that?

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Order. This debate has been clearly advertised and it is about a particular subject—of which the hon. Member has chosen to submit to Mr Speaker: Mr Speaker has seen fit that it should be selected for debate, and we will have a debate on this subject and this subject alone.

Stephen Kinnock: I thank the hon. Gentleman and would be delighted to discuss that at another time, following the ruling of our Chairman.

It is impossible to separate the demolitions from the illegal policy of annexation and settlements, because for settlements to be constructed, existing property or land has to be cleared. Because of these two interconnected policies, Israel is in violation of 40 UN Security Council resolutions and over 100 General Assembly resolutions. These violations harm not only the Palestinian people and the standing of Israel but all of us, by serving to undermine international law and prospects for peace. They are a scar on the conscience of the international community. The latest US move to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel supports this undermining of international law and validating of the illegal policies and practices of the Government of Israel.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman, who is making a very informed case. He is absolutely right that the illegal settlements and the demolition of Palestinian property are a major roadblock to peace in that region. As we have heard from hon. Members, the announcement by President Trump will have a devastating impact on the region and the process. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we need a united response from the international community to condemn this move?

Stephen Kinnock: I certainly welcome the Prime Minister’s comments earlier today. I hope there can be cross-party support for restating the clear and long-held position of the British Government on this matter.

As we speak, a swathe of communities remain at risk of forcible transfer. Susiya, Khan al-Ahmar, Ain al-Hilweh, Um al-Jamal and Jabal al-Baba are under imminent threat—824 people, 464 under the age of 18, reside in these communities. Just a few days ago, 35 UK rabbis wrote to the Israeli ambassador regarding the impending demolitions in Susiya, to urge the Israeli Government to stop and think. Demolition, displacement and forced transfer in Susiya and other Palestinian communities in Area C would constitute a war crime under international law.

I am sure that all hon. Members here will wish to join me in urging the Israeli Government to think again and withdraw its threat to demolish and displace these communities; these are violations of international law that set back the cause of peace and security. I believe we must respond to these illegal acts of occupation, as we would have done to other such acts around the world. The UK and the European Council prohibited the trade import of all goods from Crimea after the Russian illegal occupation and annexation in 2014. We should follow that precedent when it comes to the illegal settlements. This is land that has been illegally seized and annexed. Palestinian property and homes have been destroyed and seized. Communities have been uprooted, displaced and destroyed. Therefore I see no way in which we cannot cease to trade with the illegal settlements. I categorically do not propose an end to trade with the state of Israel, of course; but let us be clear: the illegal settlements are not part of Israel proper; they are part of occupied Palestinian territory. How can we continue to support this illegal settlement enterprise? Surely that makes us complicit in illegal activities.
Continued trade with illegal settlements creates an economic incentive for more illegal acts. It encourages the demolition of homes and communities to make way for settlements, simultaneously denying Palestinians access to economic opportunities.

Tamir Pardo, the former head of Mossad, has said that in that coercive environment, which is so insidious and dangerous, “Israel faces one existential threat,” and it is not external—Iran or Hezbollah—but rather “internal.” It is the result of a divisiveness in Israel, resulting from a Government that has decided to bury its head “deep in the sand, to preoccupy ourselves with alternative facts and flee from reality”.

Those are the words of a former head of Mossad, who makes clear that the existential threat facing Israel is one of its own making, namely the occupation. As Pardo has gone on to argue, the blockade, the occupation, the demolitions and the aggressive annexation of Palestinian land are matters that we should all be concerned about, not because it is a pro-Israeli or pro-Palestinian position, but because they undermine peace, as well as the moral, political and legal fabric of Israel.

Ian Austin: How can my hon. Friend argue that the existential threat that Israel faces is one of its own making, when on day one, the day of Israel’s establishment in 1948, the country was invaded by five Arab armies, when the Palestine Liberation Organisation and Hamas have been dedicated to Israel’s destruction for the past 70 years, when Iran is committed to wiping Israel off the map of the earth and is arming Hezbollah and Hamas with rockets to do that?

Stephen Kinnock: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. I remind him that I am quoting Tamir Pardo, the former head of Mossad, who has named that as the existential threat.

Ian Austin: That is not what you think, but you are quoting it.

Stephen Kinnock: I agree with Mr Pardo—

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Order.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): May I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate and thank him for making such powerful points? In December 2017, a Palestinian reflecting on the 100 years since the Balfour declaration will find that only half the deal has been done and that the Palestinians have got nothing. There have been millions of refugees over a period longer than any other relating to refugees all over the world. Palestinians cannot access their land because it has been taken systematically and there have been demolitions and planning restrictions. On top of that, Donald Trump has declared, illegally, that Jerusalem is Israel’s capital. The situation for Palestinians must be awful and dark. What hope do they really have?

Stephen Kinnock: I agree that the situation looks bleak. The question is: how can we ensure that the next generations of young Israelis and Palestinians see any merit in supporting the rule of law and democracy and believe in peace with the other side? With the wall, the demolitions, the continuing land grab, the forced displacement and the isolation of Gaza, both sides seem to be further away from peace and security than ever before.

In my opening remarks I mentioned that this year is the 25th anniversary of Oslo, but there is another anniversary that we must recall, which is that 2017 marks the centenary of the Balfour declaration. One hundred years on from Balfour, I urge every hon. Member of this House to recall the particular responsibility that our country bears for what has come to pass. With that in mind, I would implore us all to revisit the historic significance of the declaration’s words, which acclaimed that “the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people...it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.”

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the comments of Economy Minister Naftali Bennett a few months ago that they “returned” to the west bank “in order to stay forever, without conceding land and without foreign sovereignty” are at variance with the Balfour declaration?

Stephen Kinnock: I think that a number of statements from senior Israeli Government officials are not helping and are not making a constructive contribution to the peace and security that we want to see for both Israel and Palestine.

My contention is twofold. First, not only are the Israeli Government failing to uphold the principles and stated aims of the Balfour declaration; they are actively undermining them on an almost daily basis. Secondly, our Government are utterly failing to live up to the responsibilities bequeathed on them by Balfour. Therefore we must, working in partnership with our international allies, deploy every diplomatic and commercial tool at our disposal to put pressure on the Israeli Government. It is 100 years since Balfour, 50 years since the beginning of the illegal occupation and 25 years since Oslo. There have been moments along the way when it looked like things might change and that negotiations might forge a path to peace. Tragically, those moments proved to be false dawns. Rather than be disheartened, we should learn from those experiences and mistakes, rather than continue to do the same thing expecting different results. Just recently, Tony Blair admitted that our policy of isolation and disengagement with Hamas in Gaza was wrong. We should embrace that view and actively look for ways to support the present reconciliation efforts between Fatah and Hamas.

Another lesson to learn is that condemnation alone is not enough. What has decades of condemning illegal settlement expansion led to? A mushrooming of settlements across the Palestinian territory and 600,000 illegal settlers. We have to disincentivise the settlement enterprise and put a cost on the violation of international law. We in this House can no longer stand by and do nothing. We, as international actors, have a duty to act, and part of that is holding duty bearers to account, whether it is the PA, Hamas or Israel as the occupying power.
Generations of Palestinians have grown up with diminishing rights and freedoms, so how can we expect them to have faith in conventional politics, believe in the rule of law and continue to hope for peace? Let us not forget that beyond the statistics and legal arguments, these are ordinary communities and families who have the same basic aspirations that we do: to live in safety and security, to protect their families and loved ones and to enjoy their basic rights, whether in education or economic opportunity. But we will also see the continued pollution of the Israeli body politic by divisive figures and ideas with no interest in peace, unless we speak up for, and assert, norms of internal and international decency and justice. Otherwise, injustice, on both sides of this conflict, will escalate and spiral out of control. So let us stand and speak up today, and let us make our voice heard.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Order. Given the interest in this debate and the number of Members who want to speak, I was originally going to restrict speeches to three minutes, but restricting them to two minutes will get everybody in. At three minutes, not everybody will get in, so I am making the judgment that it will be two minutes, because I think it is important that all Members have an opportunity to say at least something on the record, even if they do not have much to say. I am sure it will be pregnant with meaning from both sides of the House. I call John Howell.

3.5 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), who opened this debate, for his clear statement that the Labour party is not anti-Semitic. That is a very useful thing to have put on the record.

This region is one of the most contested in the world, with extremely complex land ownership issues. It is important to contextualise those before discussing the issue, rather than simply inferring from the debate’s title that all Israel wishes to do is to destroy Palestinian homes. We need to go back to the Oslo accords of 1993 and how they split Areas A, B and C. I have seen in press reports from the Palestinian side that the Palestinians have admitted that the structures they have put out in Area C are in fact illegal. There is no getting away from that—that is exactly what they have admitted. I have spent years trying to reform the planning system in the UK; I am not going to try to reform the planning system in Israel.

The Oslo generation needs to move away from what we have seen so far. It is that generation that has participated in the stabbings, shootings and car-ramming attacks during the recent waves of terrorism. The institutionalised radicalisation behind those attacks is perhaps the most significant obstacle to a lasting peace in the generations to come.

It is time that we put more effort into a reconciliation deal, but that deal must include the demilitarisation of the Hamas terror group, and the Palestinian Authority must deliver on their commitment to end incitement and hate education, as they agreed to in the Oslo accords. If those obstacles can be overcome, the issues of borders, settlements—which have been discussed today—and security can finally be negotiated in direct peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians.

3.8 pm

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): I was going to make a number of points, but my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), who opened the debate, focused on settlements, so that is what I will address in the time available.

Settlements are obviously not making things easier, but the truth is that they can be dealt with. Some 85% of the settlers live on the Israeli side of the security barrier, on 8% of the west bank, in areas largely adjacent to Israeli urban areas. That can be dealt with by land swaps, which were the basis of the talks as far back as Camp David and Annapolis and which have been supported by the US, the EU and the Arab League; by moving settlers, as happened in Gaza; or by allowing others to stay under Palestinian sovereignty, just as there are, always have been and always will be Arabs living in Israel too.

Far from concreting over the whole of the west bank, as has been suggested, the settlements beyond the major blocks account for just 0.4% of the territory of the west bank. They are not mushrooming and do not represent a permanent physical barrier to a viable Palestinian state. Of course I am worried about settlements, but to say that they are the only or biggest issue is clearly absolute nonsense.

The truth is that, over many years and many negotiations, the issue of the settlements and land has the broadest agreement on how to solve it. Instead of demonising one side in what is a complex conflict, we should promote dialogue, because the alternative to negotiation and compromise is more conflict and more violence. Instead of pretending, as my hon. Friend’s speech does, that all the fault lies with one side or the other, Britain must play a role in working towards peace, promoting co-existence and doing what we can here in the UK to develop a lasting solution. We should support co-existence projects, increased economic ties between the Israelis and Palestinians, and measures to bring people together, like the International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace, which I hope the Minister will tell us today he will do more to support.

3.10 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): It is 50 years since Security Council resolution 242, which was based on two principles. The first was the withdrawal of Israel’s armed forces from territories occupied in the six-day war—the Gaza strip, the west bank and east Jerusalem, and parts of Syrian Golan heights. That has largely happened. The second principle was the confirmation of sovereignty and the territorial integrity of all states in the region. That has not happened, and 50 years later the failure to implement resolution 242 has resulted in some of the things on the ground we are describing today.

My position is that I fully support Israel’s right to exist. It is a thriving democracy and I want it to continue, but I also support the right of Palestinians to have their own state. I am very surprised at the way in which Israel sometimes deals with Palestinians, particularly in the
west bank. Removing people from their homes in the middle of the night—often, and by force—is utterly unacceptable, and so is the immediate bulldozing of their homes and giving them no place to live. I very much support Israel as a sovereign, independent and democratic state, but its actions in demolishing Palestinian and Bedouin communities, particularly in Area C, comes perilously close to some of the stuff I witnessed in the Balkans in the early 1990s. Israel must stop those actions, because I want fully to support Israel. Please, Israel, consider what you are doing and stop the process happening.

3.12 pm

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Pritchard. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on securing this debate.

Given the time restrictions, I will not go through what I had written, but I will echo what my hon. Friend has said. This debate is not about Palestine and Israel and the religious side of things. It is really about the children of Palestine enjoying the same rights as the children across the wall. It is about the Oslo accords and the agreements that were supposed to be a tool to liberate the Palestinians and give them rights, but have been used as a method to strangulate the Palestinians. That method has been used through jurisdiction, through the changes of law and through the application of planning processes, whereby less than 2% of planning applications have been granted in that area.

This is not the first time Israel has done this: the House needs to realise that Israel—this so-called thriving democracy—is the only country that continues to commit acts of war. That is what the demolition of settlements is. It breaches international law; it is a war crime. That is what people call it—that is what Amnesty International is calling it—and that is what we need to recognise.

What Israel is committing is a war crime. These are children who will be displaced from their families in the middle of winter with nowhere to go. It is an illegal act.

How much longer can we carry on just having these debates, trying to talk about it, but nothing is done? What is the Minister going to do when he leaves this debate? Will he put pressure on Israel to stop the demolition of Susiya? Will he give hope to those children who will not have a roof over their heads, despite the fact that these are their homes, not Israel’s?

3.14 pm

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on securing this important debate. I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

I had an opportunity to visit Israel and the west bank last year. I believe it is only possible to properly understand the challenges of the conflict by visiting there oneself. There is still support for a two-state solution on both sides of the conflict, but it seems difficult to see how that can be realised in the current climate.

There remains a great gulf between Gaza and the west bank, not only geographically but ideologically. Hamas continues to publicly condemn dialogue with Israel and remains committed to its destruction. Hamas and Fatah still cannot agree on the final terms of an Egypt-brokered reconciliation deal, and until Hamas renounces violence and disarms, it can be no partner for peace with Israel.

We have a duty not to exacerbate tensions between both sides by failing to comprehend vital aspects of the conflict, which other Members have articulated. Just as Israel enforces planning laws against Palestinian residents, so too does it remove Israeli homes built on private Palestinian land in the west bank. It is true that both Israel and the Palestinian Authority can do more to help facilitate the building of infrastructure crucial for a future Palestinian state. Like other Members, I welcome the recent fall in the number of house demolitions by the Israeli authorities. That makes everyone more amenable to a peaceful outcome.

Ultimately, we all want to see a two-state solution giving sovereignty to the Palestinians and safety and security to Israel. Let us use this debate as an opportunity to encourage both sides to return to the negotiating table, where the issue of land borders can finally be resolved and demolitions are a thing of the past.

3.16 pm

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): I am opposed to any action by any side that makes the achievement of a two-state solution more difficult to achieve, so I welcome the fact that the demolition of most encampments at both Khan al-Ahmar and Susiya has been halted while matters are considered by Israel’s High Court, and that, uniquely in the middle east, Israel’s independent judiciary can scrutinise, challenge and, where appropriate, overturn the decisions of the Executive branch. I note that illegal Israeli structures and settlements have been demolished this year at Amona, Ofra and Netiv Ha’avot. I have repeatedly made clear my opposition to increased settlement building in the west bank, and my desire, which I have expressed directly to Benjamin Netanyahu, that Israel should freeze settlement building.

Listening to today’s debate, I am deeply concerned that the intention of some might be to bring more heat than light to the search for peace. Surely Britain’s role is to support those on both sides who support peace and co-existence—people who will inevitably have to make difficult decisions and brave compromises. The vital support that we can provide requires balance, empathy and moderation in the language that we deploy. We do not advance the cause of peace with a narrative that pours blame on to one side and absolves the others of responsibility or any sense of agency.

We fool ourselves if we believe that settlement building is the sole obstacle to peace. As the former Secretary of State, John Kerry, suggested last December, “settlements are not the whole or even the primary cause of this conflict”.

We have seen in the Clinton parameters and the Geneva initiative that the problem is overcome. Peace is not just about land borders, but anyone listening to today’s debate would not think that to be the case. Alongside the condemnations of Israel’s settlement building, I want some of the other problems to be addressed, such as incitement, payment of salaries to prisoners, and naming schools after terrorists.
3.18 pm  
Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on securing this very important debate. I accept many of his arguments and respect the tone in which he put them, although I take issue with one point. This matter has been an issue for successive Governments and it is important that we work across parties to try to resolve the problems.

The issue was brought to my attention by one of my constituents, a chap called Anthony Glaister, who visits the region regularly to work with charities for the disabled. One particular story that he told me sticks in my mind. It was about Nuha, a Gazan mother of 10 who was nine months pregnant when she was killed after the house next to hers was destroyed by Israeli troops. It was reported that in the explosion the walls collapsed; the husband managed to find most of his children, but sadly his wife remained trapped when the wall collapsed on her.

House demolitions have stood at the centre of Israel’s approach to the “Arab problem” since the state’s conception. The policy goes far beyond mere administrative and military means to contain or force out an entire population. From 1948 to the present, it represents a policy of displacement, with one people dispossessing another, taking both their land and their right to self-determination. Many justifications are given. The Israeli authorities claim that the demolitions are intended not as punishment, but to deter Palestinians from future aggression and getting involved in attacks. It seems to be an ill-conceived concept to think that they could possibly be a deterrent to aggression. Clearly, it is an issue, and Netanyahu recently said so on “The Andrew Marr Show”. It is time to try to resolve it, to remove one more block to peace. I have no doubt that there are faults on both sides of the conflict, and that leads to justifications being given; but to my mind it is time to get around the table with the moderates, ideally with the support of an independent moderator, to try to resolve the issue.

3.20 pm  
Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on securing this important and timely debate. It is a debate that is close to my heart as the chair of Labour Friends of Palestine and the Middle East. I want to concentrate on one issue: the importance of upholding international law.

We have covered many of the statistics, but I will remind right hon. and hon. Members that between 2006 and 2007 Israel demolished at least 1,299 Palestinian residential units, and almost 3,000 children lost their homes as a result of the demolitions. In the same period, the Israeli civil administration demolished 462 non-residential structures, including schools, denying many Palestinians access to basic utilities and any viable hope for their local economies. The important point is whether that action helps or hinders the movement towards peace. Clearly, proceeding with the demolitions is nothing close to a blueprint for peace.

Residents of Susiya are begging the international community to highlight their case. Some 20 buildings are expected to be demolished, leaving entire families exposed to winds and freezing rain. The Israeli administration has argued that the villagers of Susiya did not have permission to build their homes—an argument that other hon. Members have repeated; but the Israeli authorities rarely give such permissions, so that is a completely false argument. Forcible transfer of protected persons is illegal; it is a war crime under both the fourth Geneva convention and the Rome statute of the International Criminal Court. The confiscation of land to build or expand settlements in an occupied territory is a violation of international law; and we must support international law.

3.22 pm  
Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): As a Member hailing from Northern Ireland I have a real understanding of complex cases as we have moved forward to try and find a solution there. I was a proud celebrant of the anniversary of the Balfour declaration and I am proud of the role that our predecessor MPs in these hallowed halls took in bringing the state of Israel back home.

In more recent history, Israeli and Palestinian negotiators agreed in 1995 to divide the west bank into Areas A, B, and C. It was agreed that Area C would be under full Israeli control. In reality the only way to resolve the issue of land borders is to secure a peace deal between Israel and the Palestinians, which will come about through the resumption of direct negotiations. The Israeli people must be brought into peace negotiations, and that is hard to do when they are constantly being vilified and criminalised in the media and through propaganda. This is not the way to pave the way to peace; this is a path that is strewn with bitter resentment and choking thorns.

In accordance with Oslo II, the Palestinian Authority dictates the planning laws in Areas A and B of the west bank, just as Israel enforces the planning and zoning laws in Area C. The fact of the matter is that the EU has built more than 1,000 homes in Area C of the west bank without planning permission, flying EU flags above those structures in what is surely a defiance of Israeli jurisdiction. The flagrant disregard of zoning laws would not be tolerated in any one of our constituencies; not one MP here would take it. I can somewhat understand why tension has been heightened. However, I can never condone or offer excuses for the actions that happen when tensions are heightened on either side.

It is our job to approach the matter in a reasoned and reasonable way, and that approach appears to be sadly lacking. I will speak out for a long-term solution that does not include heavy-handed attitudes, but includes working closely with all the parties involved, to attempt to find a way to peace and hope for the people of every community in the west bank. That is the only way to move things forward.

To get peace, so that we do not have another generation of Israelis hating Palestinians and Palestinians hating Israelis, let us get the two sides to a negotiation table and bring about a peaceful solution. I think that is the thrust of all the speeches today, and we should try to move towards that.

3.24 pm  
Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) has drawn attention to a disturbing situation.
At its base is the failure to resolve the tragic conflict between Israelis and Palestinians on the basis of setting up two states. It is worth remembering that the reason Israel is in the west bank, and used to be in Gaza before its unilateral withdrawal, is that it survived the aggressive 1967 war when the Arab states invaded Israel and threatened to throw the Jews into the sea, before there was a single settlement in that area. Following Oslo it was the Palestinians who rejected negotiated offers of a Palestinian state alongside Israel, in 2000, 2001 and 2008. Former President Bill Clinton was absolutely clear that it was the Palestinians, and Yasser Arafat in particular, who were at fault.

We need new direct negotiations. That is the only way to resolve this tragic conflict. A new initiative is possible, given recent developments in the middle east, and we should grasp those opportunities very strongly indeed. There are concerns, however. There is concern about the influence of Iran, through its activities in Syria and Lebanon through Hezbollah. Iran seems determined to prevent peace in the region. There is also ongoing concern about incitement from the Palestinian Authority, who should be partners for peace. As recently as 10 November, Palestinian Authority TV broadcast a music video entitled “Break the Jews”, which featured the terrorist Dalal Mughrabi, who murdered 37 Israelis including 12 children.

Joan Ryan: Does my hon. Friend agree that perhaps next time we debate Israel-Palestine we might hear some words of concern about the manner in which the PA is poisoning the minds of another generation of Palestinian children? I have concern for those children because of such activity, as much as any other.

Mrs Ellman: I agree with my hon. Friend. If the PA is a real partner for peace it should be promoting co-operation and co-existence, not engendering hate. However, whatever our views on that, and on relative culpability for the situation that we are in, there is no doubt that both Israelis and Palestinians deserve peace. The only way to bring that about is through direct negotiations to set up a Palestinian state alongside Israel.

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Lady was given an extra minute; those are the rules of the game, so interventions are probably not advised at this point.

3.27 pm

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): I add my congratulations to those that have been offered to my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock).

Let us be clear: what we are discussing is the forcible transfer of a civilian population protected under the fourth Geneva convention; and under the Rome statute of the International Criminal Court that is a war crime. The issue for us today is what we are going to do about it. The first thing to say is that international pressure has an impact. It is no accident that the postponement of the El plan and, in particular, to the destruction of Khan al-Ahmar school, is one of the reasons it is still standing today, despite continued threats. However, if we had any doubts about the current US Administration stepping in to warn Israel off egregious breaches of international law, the announcement by Donald Trump today will dispel them. That means that we have an even greater responsibility ourselves.

I want, if I have time, to put four suggestions to the Minister. The first is to use precise terminology referring to forcible transfer in public statements about demolitions, and to state the UK Government’s expectation that any individual responsible for the commission of that war crime will be held legally accountable under the Geneva conventions. The second is to instigate and support the establishment of an expert observation and investigation team to document apparent criminal offences linked to demolitions. The third is to seek compensation for the destruction or damage of any structure, whether funded in whole or in part, and whether directly or indirectly, by the UK Government, including through the EU. The fourth is to call for Israel to end its discriminatory and unlawful planning policies and laws by amending its planning legislation and processes clearly to ensure planning and construction rights for Palestinian residents in Area C of the occupied west bank.

3.29 pm

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): I join colleagues in thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) for securing this timely debate, and for his powerful opening remarks.

I have been on delegations to the developing world and seen real poverty, but there is nothing harder to witness than people being deliberately denied access to the very basic freedoms, opportunities and human rights that are so abundant to others who live within just a stone’s throw of that poverty. That is what I saw in the Occupied Palestinian Territories when I visited Susiya and Khan al-Ahmar earlier this year, and I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests regarding that visit.

The community at Khan al-Ahmar belongs to a Bedouin tribe, originally from Tel Arad, who were expelled by the Israeli military in the 1950s. They have been moved on several times since then, relocating again to where they are now, and living with no running water, sanitation or electricity. There are such communities all over Area C who are being perpetually moved on from their homelands.

The United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs cites forced displacement as one of the key humanitarian concerns in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. It states that the justification for the demolitions is that those buildings and structures were erected without building permits—I use the term “buildings” loosely because no serious construction is involved at all. In its Global Humanitarian Overview 2016, published this year, the UN states that a restrictive and discriminatory planning regime makes it virtually impossible for Palestinians to obtain the requisite Israeli building permits. To contrast that against the backdrop of the expansion of Israeli settlements and outposts across the west bank is to demonstrate how the double standards that characterised what I saw during my time in the region. I urge the Government to do all they can to ensure that planning and building
Programmes in Palestine are undertaken on the basis of fairness, basic human rights and the urgent requirement on the ground.

3.31 pm
Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): As many people know, I spent almost a year and a half as a volunteer in Gaza in 1991 and 1992, and I declare an interest in that I was back there last Easter, and indeed in September, operating as a breast surgeon, teaching, and running clinics. I can therefore vouch that conditions in Gaza are absolutely appalling. The first thing that hits someone when they get through Erez is the stench of sewage. Hospitals and people have four hours of electricity a day; 100,000 people were made homeless during the attacks of 2014; and 30,000 of those are still homeless.

We are predominantly talking about punishment demolitions, and those are focused around the west bank and east Jerusalem. To create the two-state solution that this country always says is our aim, the west bank has to function. Sixty per cent. of the west bank is in Area C, and less than 2% of permits will ever be granted for building there. It is therefore inevitable that most structures are illegal. Eighty per cent. of all Bedouins live in the Jordan valley, and the threat of demolition hangs over them at all times. Of the more than 350 Palestinian communities in the Jordan valley and Area C, a quarter have no access to health facilities, and half have to travel more than 30 kilometres. There is not one single permanent health facility in that area.

Money is going from the EU or the UK to build schools and clinics that are often destroyed in an act of de-development. At the same time, settlements are being built with all amenities. The IDF produced a report in 2005 to suggest that demolitions do not work and just generate hatred. It was right. We need to turn this around. It is more than a quarter of a century since the Oslo accords the creation of zones A, B and C was meant to be a transitional phase before a final settlement and a two-state solution. However, it has now become an impediment to that two-state solution, and a means of seemingly keeping it more and more distant.

3.34 pm
Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on securing this debate. The timing has proven rather opposite given the announcement that we know to expect at 6 pm this evening from the American President—I will say a little more about that in a moment.

I will start by focusing on the humanitarian aspect of what we mean when we talk about demolitions, and I will read from a letter from Nasser Nawajaa, who is leader of the village council of Susiya—a village east of Jerusalem in the South Hebron hills. He writes:

"On 22 November 2017 the Israeli State Attorney's Office announced that within 15 days they plan to demolish 20 buildings, which represent one-fifth of our village. This will violate the fundamental human rights of around 100 villagers, half of them children. The 20 buildings are our homes and also provide shelter for our animals. The timing of the demolition—in the middle of winter—could not be more devastating."

That is one of many villages now under threat from a demolition order. As hon. Members have said, there is nothing new about structures being demolished by the authorities. That has been going on for many years and, in a legal sense, because Israel has administrative authority over Area C, it is true that those structures have been built without permission. However, that authority seems to be somewhat undermined by the fact that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) said, only 2% of applications by Palestinians for building permits have been approved in the past six years—only 2%! People who are living in desperation with their farms and houses collapsing, and who have a desperate need to build new structures, have little opportunity but to try to build them unlawfully and without permission.

That is the situation we are facing, and it does not happen on the other side of the equation. If a settler living in one of the settlements wants to put an extension on their house or build a swimming pool, they have to apply for permission in the same way, but those permissions are granted. That is a gross unfairness. After the Oslo accords the creation of zones A, B and C was meant to be transitional phase before a final settlement and a two-state solution. However, it has now become an impediment to that two-state solution, and a means of seemingly keeping it more and more distant.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Was the hon. Gentleman surprised, as I was, to hear hon. Members comparing planning in this country with planning in what is an occupied country? The settler enterprise takes up 40% of the entire west bank, not the 2% or 3% that is often alleged.

Tommy Sheppard: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point.

We are discussing these demolitions now because there is a new dimension to it—this is not the same thing that has been happening over many years. Consider the situation to the east of Jerusalem in the segment of the central west bank. The demolition orders now in place on those villages are part of a strategic plan in that area to depopulate it of Palestinian villages so that Israeli settlements can be created. There is the distinct purpose of extending Jerusalem to the east and the Ma’ale Adumim area, and creating a residential corridor that will effectively bisect the west bank as it is today. That that is part of a strategic plan and involves the forcible displacement and relocation of people who are living under occupation is, according to many legal authorities, a violation of international law and, as colleagues have described, a war crime. When the Minister responds to the debate, will he say whether that is also his assessment? Does he believe that what is happening with the forcible displacement of civilians within a militarily occupied area constitutes a war crime? If that is not his view, why not? If it is his view, what on earth will we do about it?

If these demolitions go ahead, and if those within the Israeli Cabinet get their way and bisect the west bank, that puts even further into the distance any prospect of a two-state solution. It puts a sustainable, peaceful, long-term agreement far beyond the horizon, and that is bad not just for the human rights of Palestinians, but for the long-term security of Israel. There is every reason why we should be concerned and see this as a different phenomenon to what has happened in the past.

Let me turn to the announcement that we are expecting at 6 o’clock from the leader of the free world. It was trailed yesterday that the American Government intend to state their policy of recognising Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. In my view, that is a horrendous mistake. Everyone knows that Jerusalem is a city of...
great significance for the three major Abrahamic religions—Islam, Judaism and Christianity. Everyone knows that it is disputed, and everyone has a claim. If the President goes forward with this policy, he will be seen to be taking sides in that debate, and there is a great possibility that this conflict will escalate to become more of a religious conflict than it has managed to become so far. I fear for the region and I fear for the world if that is allowed to happen.

Another aspect is that if the President makes this statement and is seen to be so partisan in his dealings with the area, he will pull the rug from underneath the feet of many people on both sides who are desperately trying to find a solution, to compromise and to accommodate one another. It will create a further problem for our Foreign and Commonwealth Office because, until now, we have looked to America to be a broker in this situation—to sponsor peace talks and to try to move things forward. If the President takes this action, he will effectively be absenting America from that process and leaving an international vacuum. That means that this country needs to step up and recognise its historic responsibilities. We need to talk with the other permanent members of the UN Security Council and try to get a fresh initiative before it is too late, because this 6 o’clock statement will take us immeasurably backwards and make this world a much more dangerous place. That is the context in which we should consider this debate.

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s accommodation.

3.40 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. We have had a number of debates on the middle east in recent months; the most recent was around the centenary of the Balfour declaration. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on securing this important debate. I welcome the opportunity to focus on the specific issue of demolitions, especially following a recent trip to the area in which I visited two villages that had been served with demolition orders.

I could not start my summing up today, however, without reflecting my sheer disbelief at the White House’s decision to move the US embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, as other hon. Members have mentioned. That reckless and provocative act not only sets back the road to a political settlement for the Israel-Palestine conflict by a generation, but threatens to escalate tensions at a time when international efforts should be focused on reducing tension, upholding the rule of law and promoting peace.

We heard some remarkable contributions from 13 different hon. Members in the two minutes that each was allowed, due to the popularity of the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon, who introduced the debate, told us about the difficulties of a two-state solution, given the current level of settlements and occupations. He also told us about the increase in illegal settlements over 25 years and urged the Israeli Government to think again. He mentioned that, in his view, the Israeli Government were undermining the Balfour declaration. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) talked in his contribution about the fact that demolitions are indeed a war crime, as many other hon. Members mentioned too.

Although I welcome the fact that the number of demolitions this year has fallen from record highs in 2016, that number is still unacceptable.

Bob Stewart: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Fabian Hamilton: Sorry, I will not, because I have very little time. I hope the hon. Gentleman will forgive me.

Figures from the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs show that from January to early October 2017, 349 structures were demolished in the west bank, leaving 542 people displaced. It is not just homes that are being demolished; the Palestinian Authority’s Ministry of Education has stated that there are at least 50 Palestinian schools in Area C with a demolition or stop-work order pending.

We on this side of the House are very concerned that Donald Trump’s lack of interest in this issue has been taken as a green light by some in Prime Minister Netanyahu’s Administration to behave as they please. An article written last summer by the Defence Minister, Avigdor Lieberman, made it clear that he does not see the current White House as a barrier to their demolitions policy. In the absence of any leadership from the USA, the UK must play an active role and continue to work with our EU partners to place pressure on the Israeli Government. EU figures show that from January to October 2017, 72 EU or EU member state-funded structures were targeted for demolition. What assessment have the FCO and the Department for International Development made of the cost of those recent demolitions and property seizures to UK taxpayers? Can the Minister tell us what representations have been made to the Israeli authorities to recover any costs?

The issue of demolitions is inextricably linked to the heavy restrictions on building permits for Palestinians, which make it virtually impossible to build legally within Area C, which makes up 60% of the west bank. An EU report published earlier this year stated that approximately 1% of building permit applications by Palestinians have been granted in recent years. Does the Minister agree that the current building permit system is unsustainable and incongruous with the idea of a viable Palestinian state? How can Palestinians living in those restricted areas picture the future of their communities, when any attempts at development carry the risk of being destroyed?

Four weeks ago, I travelled to the Occupied Palestinian Territories with the shadow Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry). We also visited Israel. In the occupied territories, we saw some shocking examples of demolitions in the village of Susiya in the Hebron hills, where even the dwelling caves had been destroyed by the Israeli authorities for no obvious reason.

Andy Slaughter: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Fabian Hamilton: I am sorry; I cannot. I have very little time left.

We visited the Bedouin settlement of Khan al-Ahmar, where we met residents and one of the Bedouin campaigners, Abu Khamis, who leads the resistance to
his village being forcibly relocated to another part of the west bank with which villagers have no connection.

The World Bank’s figures show that if the Palestinians were given permission to develop, the west bank has the potential to grow into a successful economy. Ultimately, the Palestinian people do not want to be reliant on international aid. They must be given the chance to stand on their own feet. The inconsistency in the Israeli Government’s policies towards Israeli settlements and Palestinian development is staggering. The Israeli Government are now in a position where they feel that they can be seen to boast about the development of settlement homes. The Prime Minister’s office recently claimed that, “12,000 settlement homes...were advanced through various planning stages in 2017”.

On my recent trip to Israel, I looked at maps of settlement activity and was deeply concerned by the pace of development. UN Security Council resolution 2334, which was passed last December, reaffirmed that the establishment of Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories has no legal validity and is a violation of international law.

The settlements and demolitions are not the only barriers to peace in the region, so let us be clear that rocket and terror attacks are completely unacceptable and must be condemned by everybody. On this side of the House, we cautiously welcome the recent talks between Fatah and Hamas, and we hope that they will help to ease some of the security challenges posed by Hamas’ control of Gaza.

I welcome the British Government’s interventions about the impending demolition of the village of Susiya. Reports by the Israeli press suggest that British representations on that matter prior to Prime Minister Netanyahu’s visit to the UK helped to postpone the demolition of Susiya. That shows that when we speak out about such issues, we can have a positive effect. I thank the Minister for the excellent work that he has done. However, I remain concerned about the Israeli authorities’ announcement on 22 November that one fifth of Susiya will be demolished within 15 days. Can the Minister reassure us that the UK Government continue to raise objections to the demolition of Susiya? More broadly, can he outline his Government’s overall strategy for opposing demolitions and settlements?

In conclusion, I am pleased that the contributions from hon. Members across different parties have made it clear that British parliamentarians are strongly interested in this issue. It is important to convey the message that we are following this matter closely, especially at a time when the US seems to be retreating from its leadership role. I hope that the Minister will take note of the opinions voiced in the debate and ensure that they are raised in any future representations to the Israeli Government on this issue.

3.48 pm

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I thank the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) for securing this debate. Although I do not agree with everything he said, I appreciate the measured and thoughtful way, which is familiar to all of us, in which he addressed the topic. The interventions and contributions by other hon. Members have been ably summed up by the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton), so I will not go into detail about them, but the speech of the hon. Member for Aberavon reminded us once again of the difficulties in dealing with this issue. Each side has real challenges for the other based on physical clashes, conflict and loss of life, sometimes in unclear circumstances.

I doubt whether I can move any particular set of entrenched views, but I try to represent fairly the UK Government, who have long experience—as I do—of having friends across the divide. We understand both sides of this difficult issue, offer criticism and support for actions in considered response to them and, above all, seek with increased urgency to press the case for a negotiated peace as the only way to resolve many of the matters that hon. Members have raised today before it is too late.

Concern about the general should not obscure specifics. Glorification of and incitement to terror is wrong, despite the background of occupation. Illegal settlements are wrong, notwithstanding the origins of the war of ‘67 and its consequences. The general can be dealt with only by the overall settlement, but specifics can be addressed now; I shall address the specifics, because there are many general matters and I shall not be able to cover everything. In the time available, let me deal with one or two particular issues that have been raised that relate to demolitions and settlements.

According to the UN, Israel has demolished more than 390 buildings in the west bank since the start of this year, displacing more than 600 people. Furthermore, the Israeli military has issued demarcation orders that signal the intention to evacuate a number of communities, both in the Jordan valley and in E1. The Israeli Government have made it clear that those include the Bedouin villages of Susiya and Khan al-Ahmar, which are familiar to many hon. Members present. On 22 November, as the hon. Member for Leeds North East said, they notified the courts of their intention to demolish buildings in Susiya within 15 days. That deadline expires tomorrow. While the community’s lawyer is challenging that ruling, we are further concerned by reports that on Monday the Israeli Government announced an additional 13 demolition orders for the village. All told, that leaves about 40% of the village’s structures, including its only school, at risk of immediate demolition.

The UK position on demolitions, and what we do about them, is clear: we consider them entirely unacceptable. In all but the most exceptional cases, they are contrary to international humanitarian law. Every single demolition or eviction of a Palestinian family from their home causes unnecessary suffering and calls into question Israel’s commitment to a viable two-state solution. I am particularly concerned by the proposals to demolish Susiya and Khan al-Ahmar. When I visited the Occupied Palestinian Territories in August, I met members of the Susiya Bedouin community and we discussed the grave threat of forcible transfer and the understandable stress and anxiety that it was causing them. Some years ago, I also visited the Khan al-Ahmar community. Demolitions in Khan al-Ahmar are a particular concern because they appear to pave the way for a future settlement expansion in E1. Many hon. Members present know the geography pretty well, so they understand what that would mean: it would directly threaten a two-state solution with Jerusalem as the future capital for both states.
The UK has repeatedly called on the Israeli authorities not to go ahead with these plans. I urge them again to abide by international humanitarian law and reconsider the remaining demolitions planned for Susiya and Khan al-Ahmar.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) rose—

Alistair Burt: If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I will not give way on this occasion, because I have such a short time left and so much to deal with, and I have not got to President Trump yet. [Interruption.]

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Order. May I remind members of the public who may be tempted to take a photograph that photographs are not permitted anywhere in the House of Commons?

Alistair Burt: The British Government support Bedouin communities and Palestinians whose homes face demolition or who face eviction in Area C of the west bank. To answer a question asked by the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah), we do so principally through the funding of £3 million over three years that we provide to the Norwegian Refugee Council’s legal aid programme. This practical support helps residents to challenge decisions in the Israeli legal system; as the hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas) mentioned, there is a legal system, which on occasions has stood for the rights of those whom it feels have been unfairly and illegally treated. Some 79% of cases provided with legal representation through the Norwegian Refugee Council have resulted in the suspension of demolitions and evictions, allowing Palestinians to remain in their homes. I hope that that serves as a demonstration of our practical measures of support, beyond the representations we make to the Israeli Government and authorities, to help the rule of law in the area.

We are gravely concerned that Palestinians continue to face severe difficulty in securing building permissions—a matter that has also been raised by hon. Members. Between 2014 and summer 2016, just 1.3% of building permits requested by Palestinians in Area C were granted. Between 2010 and 2015, only 8% of all building permits given in Jerusalem were given in Palestinian neighbourhoods. Practically, that leaves Palestinians with little option but to build without permission, placing their homes at risk of demolition on the grounds that they do not have a permit. In answer to the hon. Member for Leeds North East, we continue to urge the Israeli Government to develop improved mechanisms for zoning, planning and granting permits in Area C for the benefit of the Palestinian population, including by facilitating local Palestinian participation in such mechanisms. We have allocated £900,000 to support essential infrastructure for vulnerable Palestinians in Area C.

The grave situation that Palestinian communities face, particularly in Area C, demonstrates the urgent need to make real and tangible progress towards peace. We are in close consultation with international partners, including the United Nations, about how the parties can reverse negative trends and engage in meaningful dialogue. The British Government are committed to making progress towards a two-state solution. We are clear that that can be achieved only through a negotiated agreement that leads to a safe and secure Israel alongside a viable and sovereign Palestinian state. It must be based on 1967 borders with agreed land swaps, Jerusalem as the shared capital of both states and a just, fair, agreed and realistic settlement for refugees.

Our policy on settlement remains the same: the viability of the principle of two states for two peoples is being undermined by the increased pace of settlement. The challenge was raised that we talk a lot and do not do enough, but UN resolution 2334, which the United Kingdom supported last December, was pretty clear in its degree of condemnation, saying:

“Condemning all measures aimed at altering the demographic composition, character and status of the Palestinian Territory occupied since 1967, including…the construction and expansion of settlements, transfer of Israeli settlers, confiscation of land, demolition of homes and displacement of Palestinian civilians, in violation of international humanitarian law and relevant resolutions”.

That resolution was criticised in some quarters, but it is clear evidence of the United Kingdom’s determination on that side.

On the other side, as hon. Members have said, we have been very clear that settlements and demolitions are far from being the only problem in the conflict. As the Quartet set out in its July 2016 report, terrorism and incitement undermine the prospects of a two-state solution. That point cannot be passed by in any debate we have on the subject. We deplore all forms of incitement, including comments that stir up hatred and prejudice. We therefore encourage both the Palestinian Authority and the Government of Israel to reject any hate speech or incitement and to prepare their populations for peaceful co-existence, including by promoting a more positive portrayal of each other. As the hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) and other hon. Members said, promoting peaceful co-existence projects really matters now, at a time when we need to make progress.

Before I conclude, it would be wrong not to mention the events of today. As the Foreign Secretary said in Brussels this morning, we are concerned by reports that the US is considering recognising Jerusalem as the Israeli capital before a final status agreement. Like our international partners, we believe such a move could inflame tension in the region. Our position is clear and long-standing: the status of Jerusalem should be determined in a negotiated settlement between the Israelis and the Palestinians, and Jerusalem should ultimately form a shared capital between the Israeli and Palestinian states. I hesitate to say more until we hear what the President actually says and listen to the context in which he sets it. Tomorrow we will have a better opportunity to set out where his statements and commitment stand in relation to other aspects. The United Kingdom has no intention of moving its embassy from Tel Aviv.

Stephen Kinnock: I thank the Minister. I certainly welcome his comments on a range of issues. He gave a very balanced, reasonable and pragmatic overview of what has been said today and where we need to go from here. He rightly recognised that nobody is perfect in this situation and everybody needs to get to the table.

3.58 pm

Stephen Kinnock: I thank the Minister. I certainly welcome his comments on a range of issues. He gave a very balanced, reasonable and pragmatic overview of what has been said today and where we need to go from here. He rightly recognised that nobody is perfect in this situation and everybody needs to get to the table.

3.58 pm

Stephen Kinnock: I thank the Minister. I certainly welcome his comments on a range of issues. He gave a very balanced, reasonable and pragmatic overview of what has been said today and where we need to go from here. He rightly recognised that nobody is perfect in this situation and everybody needs to get to the table.
What I really hope is that the Government will close the gap between rhetoric and reality and follow up on the Minister’s statements. I am sure we can rely on the Minister’s belief in them, but we now need to turn that belief into concrete action and finally start to make progress on the desperate and challenging situation in the illegally occupied territories of the west bank.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the effect of Israeli demolitions on Palestinian communities.

Terror Attacks: Government Financial Support

4.1 pm

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government financial support for victims of terror attacks.

I believe this is the first time I have spoken with you in the Chair, Mr Davies. It is nice to see you. We do not have long this afternoon, so I want to focus on recent attacks within the UK and especially in my constituency, the immediate financial support available from the Government and the Government-backed Pool Reinsurance Company system.

Six months ago, on 3 June, my community was attacked by murderous cowards. Three men killed eight innocent people and injured many more before being shot by the police. The response of all our emergency services was absolutely phenomenal. It was a genuine honour to attend the tri-forces commendation service earlier this week, which acknowledged the valour and bravery of many of the police officers from the three forces and from members of the public. The wider public response was equally overwhelming. It included offers of somewhere safe to hide, somewhere to charge a mobile phone to keep in touch with loved ones, and free rides to safety from local cabbies.

There was also a huge effort to reclaim the area as quickly as possible and make it once again the most vibrant and dynamic food and drink venue in London. The whole team at Southwark cathedral and other local organisations deserve praise for their efforts to bring the community back together as quickly as possible after the attack. The Prime Minister talked about the attack on the night. She chaired Cobra the next day, but it took 26 days before the attack was officially certified as a terror incident. That had important ramifications for local businesses. The certification process must be updated. Given modern communications, that kind of delay is simply unacceptable.

In contrast, the police cordon was necessary for their investigation, but it meant that local businesses lost access to their premises for 10 days. The latest estimate is that their losses reach almost £2 million. That is due to direct loss of stock and produce, lost orders and at least one firm that lost a contract to supply restaurants and hotels across London. The cordon and the attack itself meant the loss of bookings and reservations at local restaurants and at the London Bridge Experience, for example.

The Borough Market Trust has done a huge amount. It has been a vast, incredible effort. It is running incredible events and has raised £50,000 from other member businesses to support those affected. A similar sum has been raised from public donations and £16,000 has been raised from #LoveBorough merchandise. The trust directly supports new and small start-up businesses and has been pivotal in keeping some of those microbusinesses afloat after the attack, with at least one person’s personal mortgage being covered through trust funding due to a lack of compensation available from central Government. The trust also suspended rents and worked with other local employers to drive up trade.
It will not be often that you hear Labour MPs praising News UK, Mr Davies, but its head office is at London Bridge, and some of its staff were affected on the evening of the attack and were locked in the building overnight. Since the attack, it has provided £25,000 through lunch vouchers for its staff to directly support Borough market. That has been incredibly well received by market traders, who are directly affected. My local Labour council has provided rates relief of £104,000, and the Mayor of London, Labour’s Sadiq Khan, has provided close to £200,000 in help.

The response from the public, businesses, councils and City Hall is very welcome, but is in stark contrast to the Reinsurance (Acts of Terrorism) Act 1993, which established the Pool Re system. That system was built following Provisional IRA attacks on infrastructure that were designed to hit the UK economically. The Act was deliberately drafted to cover physical damage to property and buildings following such incidents as the Manchester Arndale and Canary Wharf attacks. Today’s risks are very different. The kind of terrorism we have seen more recently is designed to target how we live and who we are, and specifically targets innocent civilians and uses vehicles and knives. We know this—sadly, we have seen it—and the Met, the Home Office and wider Government know this, yet for two years Ministers have apparently ignored requests to update the system. Government action is required. Where Pool Re can act on its own, it has. It has extended terror insurance cover to cyber-attacks from next year. It can do that within the powers it has, but to change the definition of physical damage requires legislation and Government action.

Physical damage is not the only thing that needs to be covered. Knife attacks must be incorporated. When introducing legislation, I hope that the Government will look at defining what represents terror and what represents business interruption more tightly to distinguish between payments. The Government could also oblige large employers or those with higher turnover to have better or more extensive coverage, and look at why many small and medium-sized enterprises do not have terror insurance coverage, even in high-risk areas. However, none of those issues can be addressed if legislation is not introduced. I should add that introducing legislation and making those changes will not result in new costs to taxpayers, who would be covered by the pooled system.

For my part, I commit to helping to close this loophole in any way I can. Sadly, I have seen the impact on local businesses of the current inadequate system. I am really grateful to the Association of British Insurers, the British Insurance Brokers’ Association and all others who have worked with me on this issue since June. There is widespread acknowledgment of the need to close the loophole. However, just as public and other financial support for the area should be matched by Government compensation, recognition of the outdated insurance model should now be matched with the political will for modernisation from the Government.

As things stand, if another attack occurred today, six months after London Bridge and Borough market were so brutally attacked, employers would face exactly the same problems. In failing to act, we have a Government that risks undermining their rhetoric about not letting terrorists win. If terrorists truly are not to win, action is needed. I hope the Minister will be able to tell us today that the Government will introduce measures to deliver belated compensation to those affected in my constituency. I hope he can also tell us how the Government will administer future compensation, improve the certification process to prevent future delays, and improve the Pool Reinsurance system. I look forward to the Minister’s response.
4.11 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Stephen Barclay): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I thank the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) for introducing this important debate. The House is united in our condemnation of the atrocity that was committed against his constituents and those of a number of other colleagues.

The hon. Gentleman expressed his understandable concern about the number of days taken in responding to the certification of terrorism, and what he perceived to be a delay by the Treasury. To clarify, the Treasury responded to the certificate within 48 hours of its receipt. Clearly the police were focusing on the investigation, and that may have played a part in the number of days that it took for the Treasury to receive that certificate, but the Treasury did respond within 48 hours of doing so.

I am very aware of the impact on businesses in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency following the attacks—indeed, he and I met to discuss it with a number of his affected constituents. As he set out, traders in Borough market have had a number of difficulties, particularly in accessing their insurance payments.

Accessible insurance is vital for businesses and individuals. It protects them financially from life-changing losses and gives firms extra security and confidence when going about their regular business. That is why, in 1993, when the insurance market stopped offering terrorism cover following the IRA attacks, the Government stepped in to establish Pool Re. That move was made to provide reinsurance cover, to stimulate the private market and to ensure that businesses could access protection again.

Pool Re is now widely regarded as the global leader in terrorism insurance cover. Since its launch, Pool Re has successfully reinvigorated the terrorism insurance market in the UK. Pool Re has also protected businesses, paying out more than £600 million, including for the recent attacks in Manchester, for example. The Government are committed to ensuring that Pool Re continues to protect businesses and enables effective terrorism insurance cover. We regularly monitor Pool Re in that context, and agree that in recent years a gap has appeared in its coverage. That is the legitimate point which sits at the core of the hon. Gentleman’s rationale for calling today’s debate.

The gap means that some businesses may not be insured for a loss of income in specific circumstances, where losses are incurred due to a terrorist attack but there is no physical damage. The lack of physical damage is particularly material in this instance. The Government recognise the need to address that, and I can therefore confirm that we are exploring options, including legislation, and aim to confirm our next steps early in the new year.

We have already shown that we are prepared to take action to modernise Pool Re and to support businesses in the UK. We recently finalised changes to the scheme, meaning that it will include cover for physical damage caused by a cyber trigger. That precautionary measure helps to future-proof Pool Re, and demonstrates our commitment to maintaining the UK’s position at the forefront of those nations reinforcing their economies against terrorism risks. In terms of Government funding in response to terrorism, we are ensuring, across Government, that affected communities have the right support in place to rebuild and recover from such attacks.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) for securing the debate. I am the Member for Manchester, Gorton, and this year we experienced an attack in which 22 people were killed. Manchester then set up the “We Love Manchester” emergency fund in conjunction with the council, which raised millions of pounds. Communities and faith groups provide assistance after attacks, not just the Government and non-governmental organisations—something that will be highlighted in the all-party parliamentary group on British Muslims’ upcoming report on faith as an emergency service. What support is being given to those groups to continue their work, and what is the Minister doing to combat fake charities set up to raise funds after attacks or tragedies?

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Gentleman raises a legitimate point. None of us wants to see charities being set up to defraud by exploiting the good will of our constituents in response to such atrocities. He may be aware that the Prime Minister has established a Cabinet Office taskforce to co-ordinate the cross-Government response, to oversee progress and to expedite payments when necessary. She has recognised the issue and is engaged in addressing it.

I am also pleased to confirm that NHS England has made money available to the NHS north region to reimburse it for its efforts in respect of the Manchester attack. Unfortunately, some of the health effects will be long term, as I am sure the hon. Gentleman recognises. That is why another £1.6 million will be made available to provide mental health support for those affected. NHS England has also provided £1 million to the NHS London region for 2017-18 to assist the health system with meeting the costs of the additional mental health support required following the unprecedented level of major incidents that have occurred in London recently, including, of course, Grenfell—a further tragedy that we have debated in the House.

Although we must respond and have responded robustly to the immediate fallout of such atrocities, we must also focus on reducing the terror threat. Cross-Government spending on counter-terrorism is increasing by 30% in real terms from 2015 to 2020, and £700 million has been allocated to counter-terrorism policing this year. Furthermore, the Treasury has provided £24 million of additional funding to help meet costs arising from this year’s terror attacks that have affected police forces.

To conclude, I commend the hon. Member for introducing the debate, and for campaigning on behalf of the affected businesses in his constituency. The Government recognise the issue and are working closely with the relevant bodies to reach an appropriate solution. We always hope that we will never have to deal with yet another atrocity, but we must be prepared so that our communities, and the businesses and individuals who make them, do not unduly suffer from horrific attacks on our democracy.

Question put and agreed to.

4.19 pm

Sitting suspended.
Unduly Lenient Sentences

4.30 pm

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered unduly lenient sentences.

It is a pleasure to have this debate under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. The debate can be no surprise to the Solicitor General or to the Ministry of Justice. We have an hour, so I will keep to a couple of points that I have been making for the nearly 12 years I have been in the House, and I will leave it to other colleagues to raise other issues. I have purposely worded the motion so as to allow as many colleagues as possible to join the debate. The subject is not a controversy or party political in any shape or form. Some of this could have been addressed under the previous Labour Administration. Indeed, they tried to address it, as did the coalition; I certainly tried to address it when I was the Minister with responsibility for police, justice and, in particular, victims.

I come at the subject from the point of view of the victim. If the criminal justice system is to do what it says on the tin, it has to side with the victim. What worries me is that parts of court sentencing make victims feel, quite rightly, that the system is not on their side. There are two obvious anomalies. Anyone who has been found guilty has the right to appeal against the severity of their sentence. There is no argument about that. In a civilised society, that is right and there is a procedure for it.

In our courts, however, the procedure for victims, a victim’s representative or someone such as their MP to ask for a Crown Court sentence to be reviewed, is vague:

“Only certain types of case can be reviewed, including...murder...rape...robbery...some child sex crimes and child cruelty...some serious fraud...some serious drug crimes...some terror-related offences”;

and—without the word “some” this time—

“crimes committed because of the victim’s race or religion”.

The word “some” leaves things open in anyone’s mind, making it enormously difficult for the public we represent to understand what can and cannot be appealed against.

When I was a Transport Minister, I noticed the classic example of death by dangerous driving. Death destroys a family, and if drink and drugs are involved in the case, the sentence is appealable. A sentence for death destroys a family, and if drink and drugs are involved in serious offences are tried in the juvenile courts, my understanding is that it is not possible to appeal against undue leniency. If I am wrong, I am sure the Solicitor General will tell me.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Is he aware that more than 40% of sentences referred to the Attorney General are refused simply because they fall outside the scheme, and that has included at least one case of rape from the youth courts? Does he agree that that explains the clamour from the public to widen the scope of the scheme?

Sir Mike Penning: Absolutely. Colleagues across the House will bring up such anomalies during this debate. I am enormously proud of the very few drug-related driving offences that were prosecuted—I had the honour of being the Transport Minister when we introduced the drugalyser at the roadside—as well as of the first prosecutions that took place, although that took nearly four years and I was in the Ministry of Justice by then. But the sentencing also needs to be a deterrent. People need to realise that when they commit certain offences, the penalty will fit the crime. If people go before magistrates courts—I think this is what my hon. Friend said—knowing that they will get only six months, they will not opt for trial by jury or to go up through the system to be tried before a judge in the Crown Court. I agree—though this is not something I will concentrate on today—that we need a much wider debate on the types of sentencing to which I am referring.

Before I became a Minister, I did try—I appealed against the leniency of sentences, particularly those to do with paedophiles. I had real concern about some of the sentences for paedophiles who not only did not plead guilty, but did not think that they had done anything wrong, and I have always had concerns about racially aggravated offences. I think such offences are an abhorrence to our society.

I appealed successfully. One of my constituents was murdered by a man called McLoughlin, who was out of prison on day release. He attacked my constituent’s neighbour and my constituent did what I hope I would do, which was defend their neighbour, but they were murdered. McLoughlin was found guilty in the courts and given a sentence of something like 20 years—don’t quote me on that. We all knew what would happen—it would be three years or something. Nor was that the first offence, because he had murdered before. I appealed to the then Labour Attorney General that the sentence was unduly lenient. He should have got a much more severe sentence, or at the very least an indeterminate one.
In court the judge had said, “I cannot give an indeterminate sentence, because the European courts will strike it down.” That was like a red rag to a bull. The next day a judge in our courts gave it nothing to do with a European court. We subsequently won the appeal—the Attorney General agreed with me, as did, eventually, the Court of Appeal. McLoughlin was eventually given the right sentence, which was an indeterminate one. Hopefully, he will spend the rest of his life in prison. That will never bring back my constituents’ husband and father, but the original sentence was wrong.

When I got into being a Minister, in particular for policing in the Ministry of Justice, I kept asking: why are we not addressing those anomalies in the law? It is fundamentally unfair that victims do not have the same rights as the perpetrators. The Ministry of Justice is not represented in the Chamber today, but I know that the briefing would be that the cost implications of having more people in our prisons are disproportionate.

I am afraid that that is tosh. I have seen no physical evidence for that—not in the whole two and a half years I was in the Department, and I asked for it several times. The Attorney General and I debated it around the ministerial table and with the Prime Minister, who was then the Home Secretary. We never got to the bottom of the great opposition in the Ministry of Justice to more people going to appeal. In actual fact, from the other end of the telescope it looks like fewer people go to appeal because they do not all opt to go to the Crown Court, opting instead for their defence to be heard by their peers in a magistrates court. There is no evidence and we do not know exactly what is going on.

**John Howell (Henley) (Con):** Surely one solution is to ensure that the sentencing is correct at the beginning. The Select Committee on Justice is a statutory consultee of the Sentencing Council. It has to give opinions on the sentencing proposed in the council. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Committee should take a much tougher line?

**Sir Mike Penning:** My hon. Friend is a member of that Committee and it should take a much tougher line and a much closer look at the issue of fairness or unfairness. I may be wrong—I may be bashing my head against a brick wall. Perhaps victims do not want their voices heard. Perhaps they do not want to feel that they are equal in the courts.

In the past few weeks I have taken up the biggest anomaly, which really upsets me. I appealed recently against the sentences given to a group of gentlemen—I use that word advisedly—who were involved in the sex gangs in Newcastle. I can say that because they have been convicted. When I saw the sentence, I was very surprised that the judge had not taken into consideration that the crimes were obviously racially motivated. All the girls but one, I think, were white, and nearly all the perpetrators were of Asian extraction. That is not casting aspersions on the whole community; they are simply the facts.

I wrote to the Attorney General, to ask whether he would kindly look into this, whether he agreed that the sentences were unduly lenient and, if so, whether he could refer the issue to the appeal court. To my astonishment, a very polite letter came back from the Attorney General that said, “I’m really sorry; I cannot look into this, because you are outside the 28-day limit. You have to appeal within 28 days to the Attorney General.” I said, “It was only in the papers the day before yesterday”. “Ah,” said the Attorney General, because the judge had put a restriction on reporting the sentencing. The sentence had actually taken place about two and half months beforehand. The victims did not know that and neither did we. No one knew, so it was not possible to appeal against the leniency.

From conversations that I have had with the Solicitor General, I know that he will come up with some ideas. The situation, however, is an insult to those victims whom we are supposed to represent, not just here but in our courts, so that justice is seen to be done. I ask the Solicitor General: is there an answer? A pretty simple answer would be that, if the judge puts a restriction on court reporting, the Attorney General should be informed of the sentence and be able to look into it. Even though that is a step in the right direction, the problem is that the victims do not know, so their legal representatives are not able to appeal on their behalf; and neither are we. We need to do something about that. I have previously discussed with the Attorney General the issue of how to get justice for victims and I got quite an interesting response. It was very different from that which I received form the Ministry of Justice. The simplest way for victims to get justice would be to make it possible to appeal against unduly lenient sentences in the Crown court. That option is available to the perpetrators—those found guilty of a crime have those rights—so why is it not available for victims?

**Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP):** Will the right hon Gentleman give way?

**Sir Mike Penning:** I will just say one last thing and then I will give way, as I am conscious of the time. I am absolutely passionate about this issue. I believe that we have the greatest criminal justice system in the world, but it needs to learn from what it is doing wrong. This is one example of that.

**Mr Campbell:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way and I congratulate him on securing the debate. Does he agree that the 28-day limit is in all probability against the spirit in which it was introduced? Does he agree that a way around that would be that any time limit, be it 28 days or more, should be applicable from the time when any relative or victim becomes aware of the leniency of the sentence given by the court?

**Sir Mike Penning:** I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman. The appeal system states that it is not just the victim or their MP who has the right to say that they think there is an anomaly and that something has gone wrong. Anybody can appeal. The only way that they can do that is if the 28-day period starts on the day that the sentence becomes public. That is the only way it can work. We can consider other ways to do that, but I think that is the only way. It should be possible to appeal against all unduly lenient Crown court sentences. I have not seen any evidence of exactly what that would cost. We all understand the issue of cost, but it is important that the justice system is fair.

The 28-day period has to be addressed. There is something fundamentally wrong. There are cases where people have been unwell following the loss of a loved
one and have not had the opportunity to appeal in time. The judges have a very limited power and once the 28 days are over, the Attorney General cannot do anything. That has to change.

I will get lots of letters tomorrow morning saying that I should have brought up lots of different subjects. One particular subject I want to raise is cruelty to animals, which is fundamentally wrong. I think that sentencing for cruelty to animals is really wrong and it needs to be addressed. There are human victims of that crime, as well as the animals subjected to cruelty. There are lots of other issues, too. I wanted this debate to concentrate specifically on the victim, and I hope that I have done that.

Several hon. Members rose—

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Order. I am aware of the number of people who want to speak, so I am introducing a time limit of four minutes for speeches.

4.45 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) on bringing this issue to the House. Over my 30 years as a councillor, as a Member of the Legislative Assembly and now as an MP, I have seen literally thousands of cases, but these cases are different. They stick in my mind because of what happened. In the short time I have, I would like to mention the heartbroken mothers whose lives were torn apart when their children were killed by a drunk driver, and the knife being twisted further at court when the judge passed a sentence that came nowhere close to natural justice.

My heart aches when I think of those scenarios, as it does in the case of sexual abuse of children. They are the most difficult cases that I have ever dealt with as an elected representative. They are very emotional because I become intertwined with the person telling the story. When those abused children become adults and they speak out about what was done to them, the nightmare comes back—something triggers it and I do not know what it is—but all of a sudden their memories of what took place when they were children become part of the living hell that they are in. There is the physical and emotional turmoil of taking the step of reporting their abuser to the police. They then go through the interview process and finally, the intrusive court case which, no matter how sensitively the judge handles it, inevitably causes more wounds and scars.

After putting themselves through all this, in the hope of finding justice or some form of closure, they find only heartache and even feel dismissed, as if they are not worth the trouble. I understand that it is hard for judges who wish to do more but find that their hands are tied. In Northern Ireland, the Public Prosecution Service offers the following guidance on unduly lenient sentences:

“In certain cases, the Director of Public Prosecutions for Northern Ireland, who heads the Public Prosecution Service (PPS), has the power to ask the Court of Appeal to review a sentence on the grounds that it is unduly lenient. An application to review a sentence must be made within 28 days from the day when the sentence was imposed.”

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned that. It continues:

“If the Court of Appeal agrees that the sentence was unduly lenient it may increase the sentence... The court also takes account of the fact that the offender has been put through the sentencing process a second time. It will not intervene unless the sentence is significantly below the sentence that the judge should have passed.”

There is a big if in the process. A victim is once again looking at a long drawn-out process to have their justice and this is not guaranteed. They must again take the steps to make contact, retell their horrific story, wait to be judged to see if what happened to them is bad enough to be reviewed, and wait to see if another court will uphold, increase or decrease the sentence of the person who destroyed their life. All the while, it is the victim who is suffering in silence, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) said, while the perpetrator goes through a further sentencing process. Something seems a little wrong with that. The right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead said that, too, in his introduction.

I understand that our prison service is at capacity. I understand that it is impossible to hand out custodial sentences for every crime and indeed it would be insane to do so. I also understand that the punishment must fit the crime and there are certain crimes that are not punished accordingly. There is an appeal system in place but it is up to us to legislate, to enable judges to make the punishment fit the crime, rather than putting the onus back on the victim and almost re-traumatising them. There has to be a better way.

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned sentencing in animal cruelty cases. I have asked for sentences to be reviewed in cases involving the horrific abuse of animals and, to be fair, the Public Prosecution Service has looked at those sentences again and increased them. But there has to be a better way, and this House is tasked with finding it. I ask the Minister, with great respect, how this will be accomplished through legislation, rather than through the appeals process.

4.50 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate my right hon. Friend for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), who hit the nail on the head in securing this timely debate. Under-sentencing has a number of effects—it causes outrage for the victim, it demoralises the police and it may cause public danger, but more important than all those things, it hinders the development of a rational sentencing procedure in the courts. It is important to bear that in mind.

We heard from my right hon. Friend that the subjects covered by the unduly lenient sentences scheme were extended in August to include terrorist activities, so it is open for them to be further extended in the way that he suggests. I presume that the Solicitor General has some sympathy with that view. I know that he is working hard to try to bring charges against people who have received unduly lenient sentences, and he has had some success with that in the courts.

Let me return to the point that I made in an intervention on my right hon. Friend. The Justice Committee is a statutory consultee of the Sentencing Council, which produces guidelines for judges about what sentences should be applied in individual cases and how they should be applied. I understand, having reviewed some of those things, that this is difficult because the issues are complex and challenging. For example, the Select Committee looked at intimidatory offences and domestic
abuse, which would be ideal for inclusion in the scheme, but our efforts to give concrete examples were bedevilled by the complexity of the issues involved.

However, we should put more emphasis on this issue. We ought to give a firm steer to the Justice Committee that it can take as hard a line as it likes and give a good, rational steer in this area. One of the things I was most taken aback by when looking at domestic abuse cases was the mitigating factors that were brought in, which included good character, provocation, self-referral for treatment and so on. They have their place, of course, but there seemed to be too strong an emphasis on them rather than on getting sentencing right in the first place.

Unless we get sentencing right, we will blunt the deterrent effect of the criminal law. That would be a disaster for us and a disaster for the judicial system.

4.53 pm

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) on securing this debate. I echo what he said about the importance of the victim being at the centre: victims and their families should absolutely be front and centre.

It is completely right that it is open to victims and their families, and to the general public, to make complaints about undue leniency to the Attorney General. However, as my right hon. Friend said—he hit the nail on the head—the current system is less clear than it should be, if I may use that phrase, and the threshold for referral seems pretty high.

Let me use a specific case from my constituency, in which there are no ongoing legal proceedings, to illustrate that. Tragically, Aiden Platt, a young constituent of mine in North Devon, was killed when his motorbike was hit by a driver under the influence of drugs. Aiden was just 20 years old. That hit the family and the community of North Devon extremely hard. The driver, a woman called Laura Ward, had cannabis, diazepam and amphetamines in her system when she hit Aiden. At the subsequent court case, she admitted causing death by careless driving while under the influence of drugs. Between the crash and the court case, a further 20-month suspended sentence. He specifically said that the woman who killed their son received sends out the wrong message. I hope that, in reviewing the rules for unduly lenient sentencing—I welcome the fact that that is being done—we can put that right, and I very much look forward to the Solicitor General’s comments.

Sir Mike Penning: I wanted to cover this point. Actually, the legal profession have to look at themselves as well, because often they advise clients to plead guilty to one offence, knowing that it is outside the scheme, rather than defending themselves inside the scheme. The legal profession are telling them what to do to beat the system.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): One of the good things about our last manifesto was our clear commitment to extending the unduly lenient sentences scheme, which was a continuation of our clear commitment in our previous manifesto. I just wish we would get on with it. The scheme has been modestly extended to include some terrorism-related offences, but we need it to cover far more offences.

I regularly criticise the justice system, but one of the good things about it is the ability to challenge sentences that fall outside the normal bounds of leniency. I have successfully used that provision a few times, and I congratulate the Solicitor General, who has done a brilliant job in appealing many unduly lenient sentences with great success.

One recent example of the power of the scheme is the case of Safak Sinem Bozkurt. She was a prison officer who smuggled phones, SIM cards and drugs into prison. She avoided prison because of her children. When the case was appealed, counsel on behalf of the Solicitor General said that her children could not be used as a “trump card” to avoid jail. The judges agreed that the sentence was too lenient and she was rightly sent to prison.

It is frustrating when cases cannot be appealed because they do not fall within the scheme. Ironically, there can be variation where the same offence is charged differently. For example, where someone is charged with sexual activity with a child, their sentence generally can be appealed, but where they are charged with sexual activity with a child while in a position of trust, it cannot be.

Peter Heaton-Jones: It is a great shame that we are not able to appeal in all cases. I know the Solicitor General cares passionately about this issue, and I hope that she can do something to fix that. Ms Jones: It is a great shame that we are not able to appeal in all cases. I know the Solicitor General cares passionately about this issue, and I hope that she can do something to fix that.

Philip Davies: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I am grateful to him for highlighting that point. The inability to appeal a sentence based on charging and not the facts has led to some very low sentences. One example involved a transsexual called Gina Owen, whose case was before the court last year. She pleaded guilty to two counts of causing or inciting a child to engage in sexual activity 12 years earlier, before she underwent sex reassignment surgery. She only pleaded guilty on the day of the trial when the charges were amended.

For those reasons, I ask the Solicitor General not just to give consideration to what offences are within the scope of the unduly lenient sentencing rules, but to consider widening the Attorney General’s ability to refer cases where the offence is already within the scope of the rules but the “gross error” threshold for referral seems to set a pretty high bar. My constituents would take great confidence from knowing that those matters were being reviewed. They believe that the sentence that the woman who killed their son received sends out the wrong message. I hope that, in reviewing the rules for unduly lenient sentencing—I welcome the fact that that is being done—we can put that right, and I very much look forward to the Solicitor General’s comments.

4.57 pm
Gina Owen was employed as a taxi driver by the local council to drive children to a special school in Somerset. During the six-month period of abuse, I understand that Gina Owen made the victim tie her up in bondage sessions, urinate in her mouth and humiliate her by hitting her then-male genitalia. Gina Owen was 61 when the matter came to court and the abuse was of a boy who was around 13.

I raised the case with the Solicitor General, who wrote to me to say:

“The CPS has now considered the amendment to the indictment and concluded that counsel’s approach was wrong. Their clear view is that...he was at all times under the age of 16. Therefore, there was a realistic prospect of conviction for the under 16 offence. This is clearly a more serious offence than the position of trust, carrying a maximum penalty of 14 years, as opposed to 2 years. It is also in the unduly lenient sentencing scheme. The CPS’s view is that it would also have been in the public interest to prosecute”—for that more serious offence—

“notwithstanding the possibility of a plea to the position of trust offences.”

As a result, the defendant received a conditional discharge, which was wholly inappropriate given the circumstances—no punishment at all, to be perfectly honest. What kind of justice is that for the 13-year-old boy who was abused? The whole saga was made worse by the fact that nothing could be done to appeal the sentence because of the charging of that offence. This is an obvious anomaly that needs fixing, and it could be easily done. It is accepted that the scheme has grown in a haphazard fashion and that that has given rise to inconsistencies. I therefore hope the scheme will be widened further.

I also hope, like my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), that the time limit for the scheme will be changed, because 28 days is very little time for someone to find out about a case and get their objections to the Attorney General. Sometimes, victims do not find out in time about the sentence or they may not be aware that it can be appealed until it is too late. I know that Families Fighting for Justice supports the change, and I have previously tabled amendments to Bills to try to achieve it. I appreciate that the period cannot be indefinite, but the very strict 28 days has meant that some criminals have certainly evaded real justice.

Jean Taylor, the campaigner from Families Fighting for Justice, has had some terrible examples. People have been convicted of serious crimes such as murder and not been able to have their cases considered again because of the strict 28-day limit. I therefore hope that the Government will revisit the scheme, and I congratulate my right hon. Friend for bringing this matter to the House’s attention.

5.2 pm

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies; I apologise for arriving two or three minutes late for the debate. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) on securing this important debate and bringing his expertise to bear.

Upholding the rule of law is one of the fundamental duties of any Government. It is essential that every citizen knows that the law is on their side and that public safety is the top priority. Solihull has recently experienced a rise in crime, especially so-called acquisitive crimes such as aggravated burglaries, car crime and carjacking. Although our community is a safe and friendly one, we face a real challenge of criminals driving into Solihull from elsewhere in the west midlands.

I have heard it said in many parts of my constituency there is frankly a loss of faith in the criminal justice system at this time, facing this rise in crime and also perhaps in seeing some of the sentences handed out.

An excessively lenient sentence lets down not only the victim of the original crime but everybody put at risk when somebody is left on the streets who should be behind bars. Indeed, a short sentence can be the worst of all possible worlds, exposing the convict to hardened criminals and imbuing them to a life of crime, without serving as a proper, efficient deterrent.

Of course, an independent judiciary is the foundation stone of our justice system, and rightly so, but the law is laid down by Parliament and, through Parliament, by the people. It is therefore right that mechanisms such as the unduly lenient sentence scheme exist to allow the Attorney General’s Office to intervene where sentences do not properly reflect the strength of public feeling about a particular crime.

I echo the views of hon. Members about the much wider scope. Let us take one example. One area talks about “some serious fraud”. How do we decide how much of something is serious fraud? Is it about the impact on the individual or just about the scale in monetary terms? What about an old lady who will not answer her door or answer any correspondence and becomes a recluse because of what she has suffered? She may have been through a small financial theft or fraud—perhaps a few hundred pounds—but that has a significant impact on her life. How do we decide on the seriousness in those respects? The system needs to be tidied up and based on more clarity, with better openness for the public so that they can regain and boost their confidence in the judicial system.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead suggested, the 28-day period for appeal seems arbitrary. Although I realise there has to be an end date, it should not be scuppered by reporting restrictions. It seems obtuse in many regards that we have a situation where criminals are effectively beyond the reach of the system because of something put in place potentially to protect victims.

I hope that the message from this debate is loud and clear: although the system is welcome, and the Attorney General’s work in it is to be praised, I passionately believe that we need to look at this again and see how we can amend the definitions and improve the system to bring about greater confidence. In many respects, unduly lenient sentences need to be clamped down upon as soon as they occur. That sends a message to the judiciary as well: that the public have frankly had enough of unduly lenient sentences and it needs to act.

5.6 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I, too, congratulate the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) on securing this debate. He makes a powerful and persuasive case.
To cut to the chase, clearly the point the right hon. Gentleman makes about unreported sentences and the strict application of the 28-day rule is unanswerable. That definitely needs fixing. However, the main question he has asked us today is: why should the category of case in which a prosecution can appeal against unduly lenient sentences be limited? As hon. Members have set out, the Attorney General can refer unduly lenient sentences to the Court of Appeal, but only where offences are triable on indictment or are one of a restricted number of specified “either way” offences. The right hon. Gentleman made a powerful case as to why that should change. There seems little logic in such restrictions, so could they be lifted?

I know there are always dangers in comparing the two legal systems, but let me briefly mention the position in Scotland, which I think is relevant and may assist the right hon. Gentleman’s case. The right to appeal against sentences in Scotland is contained in the Criminal Procedure (Scotland) Act 1995.

Sir Mike Penning: I am a great advocate of devolution—I was a Minister involved in devolution. This is a devolved matter; this is about English courts and Welsh courts. I do not really understand why, in the limited time we have for this debate, the hon. Gentleman is going to talk about what is going on in the Scottish courts. We can have a debate on that another day. This is about English and Welsh courts.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Order. This is a matter for the Chair. The Scottish National Party is entitled to respond to the debate. I invite Mr McDonald to continue.

Stuart C. McDonald: Thank you, Mr Davies. If the right hon. Gentleman is patient, he will hear that I am trying to support his case by saying that there are no restrictions in Scotland, and the system works. I will also explain changes made there that may provide some ideas for how it could be made to work in England.

As I said, the right to appeal against unduly lenient sentences in Scotland is contained in the Criminal Procedure (Scotland) Act 1995. On the face of that legislation, there are no limits to the class of cases on indictment where the prosecutor can appeal sentences on the grounds of undue leniency. However, in summary cases, the right applies only to a class of case specified by order made by the Secretary of State.

On the face of it, exactly the same situation applies in England and Wales. However, for whatever reason—I do not know what the reasons were at the time—when the order was made in 1996, the class of case specified was effectively “any case”. In short, all sentences, whether on indictment or summary proceedings, can be appealed by the prosecutor. In fairness, that has not clogged up the courts there or indeed the prisons, so I think that is a separate issue. As far as I am aware, it has never been suggested since that limits be applied to such rights to appeal unduly lenient sentences. Some more recent reforms may also be relevant to the current debate; they were designed to make the court processes more sustainable, with significant changes taking place after wide-ranging reviews of both civil and criminal court processes.

In fact, it was a review of civil procedure that prompted the introduction of a new appeal tier, a Sheriff Appeal Court. To assist in ensuring that the High Court and Court of Session focused on the work it truly needed to focus on, the new Sheriff Appeal Court established in 2015 was given the task not only of taking on civil appeals work, but of hearing summary criminal appeals, including appeals against sentence, from both sheriff and justice of the peace courts. Whereas, in the past, sentencing appeals from summary cases would go to the High Court of Appeal, they now go to the new national Sheriff Appeal Court. In short, to answer the right hon. Gentleman’s point, what the Government should consider is whether, at the same time as extending the prosecutor’s right of appeal in “either way” cases, one way to make it work more effectively and efficiently without clogging up the Court of Appeal is to look for an alternative forum for such appeals against unduly lenient sentences.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I refer Members to my relevant entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, indicating that I am a non-practising door tenant at Civitas Law in Cardiff.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) on securing the debate, and on the considered way in which he introduced it. I know he has carried out a number of ministerial roles; I remember in particular his role that combined both justice and policing. While I might not always have agreed with him, I always thought he carried out the job in extremely good faith, and it is good to see him making this contribution from the Back Benches today. He described well how the system works, with the right of appeal for defendants and the unduly lenient sentence scheme as it stands. I wholly agree with him on the question of public understanding of, and confidence in, the working of the scheme and of how victims are communicated with throughout the process, whether by the courts system, the Crown Prosecution Service or their lawyers. The need for clarity is vital, and I am sure the Solicitor General will be able to touch on it in his closing remarks.

There was also a good contribution from the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell). I know the job he does on the Justice Committee, on which I served briefly in 2015, and he identified well the role of the Committee as a statutory consultee as we set the sentencing framework. That is important, and it is crucial that the Justice Committee makes its views known at that stage, as it can only assist with consistency in sentencing.

I thought there was a thread running through all the other contributions to the debate, whether from the hon. Member for Solihull (Julian Knight), the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), the hon. Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) or the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald). The real sense was about clarity, consistency and public understanding, which are vital to our criminal justice system. If I may say so, it was also a pleasure to hear from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who spoke powerfully about his 30 years of public service and the thousands of cases with various sentencing decisions that he has dealt with in Northern Ireland.

Coming to the issue of the unduly lenient sentence scheme, the Solicitor General will be aware of the 19 terror-related offences added to the scheme on 8 August this year.
The statistics are instructive, and I looked them up prior to the debate. There is no doubt that the number of requests is increasing, although that is partly due to sentences being added to the scheme. In 2010 there were 342, in 2015 there were 713 and last year—the most recent set of statistics available—the figure was up to about 837. In 2015, of those 713 requests, 136 were referred to the Court of Appeal—[Interruption.] Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Order. The sitting is suspended for 15 minutes for the Division. If there is a second vote, it will be suspended for a further 10 minutes.

5.14 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

5.26 pm

On resuming—

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I was referring to the statistics about the number of cases that have been referred to the Court of Appeal and subsequent increases. In 2015 there were 136 referrals, and 102 sentences were increased. In 2016, which is the most recent year for which there are statistics, 190 cases were referred and 141 sentences were increased.

I raise those statistics to put the debate in context. Each year, there are about 80,000 Crown court cases. I agree that there is a need for clarity and confidence in the system, which has come through powerfully in all the contributions. We need that at the police and investigation stage, at the charging stage—a number of Members referred to charging issues—and when cases are proceeding through the courts, as well as in the trial process, in the sentencing process and in terms of the options available at sentencing. It is vital that all those things are communicated. The hon. Member for North Devon raised the issue of reporting restrictions. There have to be ways to ensure that victims and their families are still aware of what has happened and get an explanation for why a particular sentence has been imposed.

All those things are very important, but I come back to the fact that in 2016, there were 141 increased sentences and 80,000 Crown court cases. We have to look at where there have been issues with sentences that fall outside the reasonable band.

Sir Mike Penning: Using statistics is a wonderful thing. As a Minister, you get them thrown at you all the time. With all due respect, the shadow Minister is not comparing like with like. We can only use the figure of how many sentences are appealed if every one of those 80,000 cases is appealable, and they are not. That is the problem. I understand where he is coming from. We do not want the courts swamped. I do not think they would be, but I am still looking for the evidence from the Justice Department. We are not comparing like with like.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: As a matter of fact, it is obviously the case that the unduly lenient sentence scheme does not cover the entire 80,000 cases. I totally accept that. That is absolutely correct.

Philip Davies: The hon. Gentleman seems to be running away with the idea that, of all these cases, only very few are deemed unduly lenient. We must make it clear that these sentences can only be appealed if they are unduly lenient. Sentences may well be lenient, but they cannot be appealed. There could be many more sentences that are lenient. These are just ones that happen to be unduly lenient.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The hon. Gentleman is quite right, but that applies the other way as well. If the defendant appeals something, as long as it is within a reasonable band, it will not be appealable the other way either. The reasonable band exists to bring certainty and consistency to sentencing, which all of us in this House who believe in the rule of law should want.

I take the point entirely that the unduly lenient sentencing scheme does not cover 80,000 cases. None the less, there are thousands of cases where the judiciary, within the sentencing framework, it has, does a good job, and we should not lose sight of the fact that we should be backing our judiciary.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Before inviting the Solicitor General to respond, I point out that the debate will end at 5.42 pm.

5.29 pm

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): Thank you, Mr Davies. Diolch yn fawr iawn. It is a pleasure to speak in the debate and I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) on securing it. He and I worked together in Government on a number of issues relating to victims, and I pay tribute to him for his sterling work during his years of service. He continues that work as a senior Back Bencher, bringing important issues to the attention of the House. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for taking part in the debate.

I think it was actually my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead who quite rightly said at the beginning of the debate that this is not a party political issue. In that spirit, I welcome some of the comments by the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), who was right to remind us that, in the majority of cases, judges apply the law as consistently as they can, but that they are applying it on a case-by-case basis in an independent manner. I think all of us in the House and beyond want to see that when it comes to upholding the rule of law.

My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) mentioned sentencing guidelines, which are a very important development in the law. That now means that, regardless of whether someone is sentenced in Truro or Merthyr Tydfil, there should be a consistency of approach; there sometimes was not in the past, quite frankly, and I think sentencing guidelines are helping to change that approach.

On the ambit of that scheme, I should remind hon. Members of its origins. It is only about 30 years of age, and it arose as a result of the famous Ealing vicarage case, in which the late Jill Saward was the victim of a horrendous rape. As a result of the outcry and the campaign that was launched, the law was changed in 1988 and the scheme was developed. It was originally very tightly constrained and applied only to a few very serious indictable-only offences, such as murder.
However, over the years it has developed in a somewhat piecemeal manner, and I readily accept that there are anomalies, inconsistencies and matters that need clarification, because the system, although I think it attracts a high degree of confidence from the public at large, could do with strengthening. I can think of no better way of strengthening it than by giving it more consistency, and therefore accessibility to members of the public who might wish to use it.

The scheme’s introduction was not without controversy. It is unusual, if not exceptional, for a member of the Executive, such as the Attorney General or me, to be able to request the judiciary to reconsider a matter that has been dealt with by a court. Rightly so; that needs to be carefully circumscribed. It is not a right of appeal; it is a right of referral, and I beg to suggest that there is a difference between the two. A referral is, if hon. Members like, like a safety valve that exists in the system to make sure that, where there has been gross error or the sort of sentence that no reasonable court should have passed, there can be intervention from a higher court in order to correct it.

Much has been made—I accept the comments by my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) of the threshold applied by the Law Officers in dealing with unduly lenient sentences. I think the threshold should be rigorous and should be high. My concern is that if we departed from the degree of information and evidence that is currently needed, we would end up in a situation in which judges would be routinely second-guessed in a way that I think would encroach on their independence. We have to be very careful about that when dealing with this system.

I take great pride in my work with regard to unduly lenient sentences. It is difficult work, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) for his work on it. There are cases in which something has quite clearly gone wrong and needs rectifying, and the Court of Appeal assists in that regard.

I find the most difficult cases to be the sort that my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon raised, in which, for example, a bereaved family have suffered the shock and horror of losing a loved one in a road traffic incident. As a result of that tragedy, nothing the court can actually do could restore that family to the position they want to be in. However, I accept his point that there is an inconsistency when offences of careless driving cannot be referred, yet an offence of careless driving where there is evidence of impairment through drink or drugs, for example, can be referred. He made his point very powerfully, and we are listening.

Similarly, my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley made the point about sexual offences committed in breach of trust. That is a very important and concerning anomaly, which again is one of the reasons why I preface my remarks by speaking about the need for clarity and consistency. Attractive though it might be to go down the line advocated by the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald), to extend the scheme in England and Wales to all offences in the Crown court and magistrates courts would be a step too far. That is why I am attracted by arguments that create consistency in the Crown court.

Let me look at the figures. It is the case that 12,800 or so indictable-only offences were sentenced in the Crown court last year. That is probably a pretty reasonable benchmark to start looking at the incidences of unduly lenient sentences. It does not include the either-way offences that might come to the Crown court or might be the subject of references, but it gives us an indication of the proportion of cases that are successfully referred.

The hon. Member for Torfaen went through some of the figures that we have. He is right to say that in the last year for which we have full figures, 837 cases were drawn to our attention and 190 of them were taken to the Court of Appeal, with an increase in 141 of the sentences. It seems to me, looking at the figures and doing the best I can, that over the last few years there has been a dramatic expansion in the number of cases brought to our attention and a roughly proportionate increase in the number of cases then successfully referred, so I do not think that my Department can be accused of playing politics with the role that we occupy. We apply the law very carefully, and I think that that important and proportionate rise indicates that we use our powers, as you would expect, Mr Davies, in a way that is consistent with our adherence to the rule of law.

I am glad that awareness of the scheme has been growing, because both the Attorney General and I, supported by our office, work very hard to ensure that awareness increases. It is consistent with the principle of open and transparent justice that we work to ensure that news about successful references is publicised, particularly in local media. We undertake a round of interviews with local media and use social media to discuss these issues. As a result, the scheme’s profile continues to rise.

Both the Attorney General and I personally present cases in the Court of Appeal. Only a few months ago, I presented the case of Paterson, the breast cancer surgeon who was responsible for the mutilation of victims who were supposed to be in his care. In a week or so, I will go to the Court of Appeal to present another case of an unduly lenient sentence. I think it is important that the Law Officers, whenever they can, personally attend to present cases before that Court. I take particular pride in that role.

I remind myself that I was a sentencer. I sat as a recorder of the Crown court for years before I became Solicitor General. I therefore know the particular challenges that face judges who have to pass sentence on cases, which allows me to understand in a particularly helpful way their position and the delicacy of the balance that needs to be struck.

I take the opportunity to remind everyone that of course anyone—any member of the public—may contact our office about an unduly lenient sentence. No special connection with the case is needed, and it only takes one request for a case to be considered. If there is a victim referral and I decide not to refer the case, a personal letter will be sent to that person, explaining carefully the reasons why. Communication is a very important part of the process, as the shadow Solicitor General said.

Let me move on to deal with reporting restrictions. Obviously, the starting point in all criminal proceedings is the open justice principle. In a very limited number of cases, as we heard, there are reporting restrictions, so in the new year, for a period of six months, we will pilot a trial of the Crown Prosecution Service referring all cases in which there is a restriction on the reporting of the sentence or sentences. That will allow the Attorney General or me to consider personally each case in which
there is potentially unduly lenient sentencing, so that no sentence slips through the cracks in the way that my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead outlined.

For those reasons, I commend the unduly lenient sentence system to the House and ask that hon. Members carry on supporting it and promoting its effectiveness.

5.41 pm

Sir Mike Penning: I thank the Solicitor General for moving significantly on this matter. I know how difficult that may have been, given the negotiations with other Departments, some of which I may have been a Minister in myself. I know that in relation to some of the things that I have asked for, there are real concerns in other Departments. But I come back to the victims. The victims do not want the thresholds changed. They just want a level playing field. They want to know that justice is being served—that the system does what it says on the tin. It is vital, when they go to court, that they are being represented and they know what is going on. I—

5.42 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).
Westminster Hall

Thursday 7 December 2017

[Mr Virendra Sharma in the Chair]

Women in the House of Commons

[Relevant documents: Oral evidence taken before the Women and Equalities Committee on 15 November 2017, on Women in the House of Commons, HC 507.]

1.30 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered the Fifth Report of the Women and Equalities Committee, Women in the House of Commons after the 2020 election, Session 2016-17, HC 630, and the Government Response, Cm 9492.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I thank the Liaison Committee for the opportunity to debate this important report, published by the Women and Equalities Committee in the last Session. I also thank my incredible Committee staff and all the witnesses who gave written and oral evidence.

In particular, Professor Rosie Campbell, professor of politics at Birkbeck College, Professor Sarah Childs and Lord Hayward all gave a great deal of their time. I also thank the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the Leader of the Opposition, and those other individuals who gave oral evidence.

In the 100 years since women were given the right to vote and stand for election, just 489 women have been elected to this place—I was the 265th, elected in 2005. Record numbers of women are in work and women are achieving record highs when it comes to education, but just a handful have had the opportunity to use their skills and expertise to represent their communities in this place. We have to ask ourselves whether that is a sign of a healthy democracy. Nothing can be more important than making sure that the institutions that are vital to our system of democracy are fit for purpose. They should function in a way that gives the electorate confidence that Parliament can make the laws that we need for a free and fair society.

Society changes, so Parliament has to change too. It is not an institution that can afford to place itself in aspic. It has to evolve to ensure that it truly represents the people we speak for and serve. That must involve recognising the changing role of women in society. Almost 100 years since legislation was passed to give some women the vote, it is timely to be debating this important report, considering what progress has been made, and ensuring that there is a clear pathway forward on the matter of women being elected to the House of Commons.

One point that emerged from the evidence session with senior representatives from the major parties in Westminster was that Parliament would be a better place if 50% of MPs were women. There is a growing understanding that although MPs represent all people in our communities, regardless of their sex or gender, women view the world through a different lens—the lens of having experienced life as a woman, and the associated differences that that involves. This place was established at a time when only men were allowed to dictate our laws and shape the future of our country. Our political parties were shaped then too. The Women and Equalities Committee’s inquiry has set out a number of recommendations that members of the Committee felt would do more than simply try to retrofit women into Parliament, instead allowing them to play a truly equal role—something that we are still very far away from achieving and can only really achieve through a step change.

The 2016 inquiry focused on what the Government, political parties, the House of Commons and the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority could do to ensure better female representation in the House of Commons in 2020 and beyond. It was launched in the context of the Boundary Commission review and the proposed reduction in the number of House of Commons seats. When the inquiry was launched, women held 30% of seats in the Commons, and the UK was ranked 48th globally for representation of women in legislatures. A lot has changed since then, but a great deal of the report remains extremely pertinent.

We found that Parliament should actively encourage women to participate in democracy, and should continue to look at ways to ensure that there are no unnecessary barriers to women coming here to represent the people who voted for them. We found that political parties had the primary responsibility to ensure that women come forward to represent them. Although the political parties have measures in place to help to achieve equality in gender representation, we felt that there was insufficient analysis of how effective those measures actually were, and that in all the parties there was a lack of clear strategy and leadership to achieve gender equality and representation.

The Committee made some quite radical recommendations. We recommended that the Government set a domestic target of 45% representation by women in Parliament by 2030. We recommended that they introduce a statutory minimum proportion of female parliamentary candidates in general elections—that target should be at least 45%, given the current deficit—with sanctions for political parties if it was not achieved. We also recommended bringing into force section 106 of the Equality Act 2010, requiring political parties to publish the data on diversity for general elections, and continuing the measures that allow things like all-women shortlists.

The Committee suggested that political parties take greater ownership of this issue, make gender balance in candidate selection a real priority, and accept that they have primary responsibility for making sure that the House of Commons is a more diverse place. We suggested that they publicly set out the measures that they plan to take to increase the proportion and number of female parliamentary candidates at the next election, and that they adopt, fund and promote training so that women can achieve those goals. We suggested that the parties should provide support for younger women and women entering politics for the first time, and that there should be a clear sense of direction towards increasing female representation in parliamentary parties, ensuring that their leaders work more closely with national decision-making bodies and local associations to deliver that.

The Government’s response was quite startling. They rejected all six of our recommendations. I do not mind if people reject one or two of them, but not all six at a time when we are still nowhere near equality. I am really pleased to have secured today’s debate, and that my
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Women in the House of Commons

[Mrs Maria Miller]

colleague from Hampshire—my hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes)—is the Minister responding on behalf of the Government. In Hampshire, we have actually done an amazing thing: about 40% of our Members of Parliament are women. We know how to do it there; we just need to do it nationally.

The Government did not support the use of legislative quotas or sanctions on parties to achieve gender balance in the Commons. I know that that is a philosophical approach. They emphasised that political parties had the primary responsibility for improving representation in the Commons. Although the Government stated that they were ready to support parties on approaches to improve diversity, they did not detail how. I was struck that they rejected the idea of enacting section 106 of the Equality Act, which would make the number of women from political parties standing for election transparent, at the same time as they were asking businesses to implement gender pay gap reporting mechanisms, which were intended to create transparency about the role of women in business and their ability to progress. I realise that gender pay gap reporting is something done by larger businesses, so perhaps the Minister could explain why we could not just ask the larger parties to report in line with section 106 of the Equality Act. That would be a way of getting started.

Unfortunately, a general election then happened, which meant that our report, which was carefully crafted around the prospect of a 2020 general election, was slightly thrown up into the air. It is good, however, that at the election earlier this year we saw the highest number and proportion of female MPs ever recorded in the UK—208 out of 650 MPs, making up about 32% of seats.

We need to put this in context. Membership of the House of Commons is not infinite. It is actually quite small—it is just 650 people—so a big change in the proportion of women requires quite a small change in numerical terms. Specifically, to achieve a 50:50 Parliament, proportion of women requires quite a small change—in it is just 650 people—so a big change in the House of Commons is not infinite. It is actually quite 208 out of 650 MPs, making up about 32% of seats.

The second issue that came out of our further oral evidence was the culture, which still causes many women concerns about coming to work in this place. The witnesses talked about cultural factors blocking women’s aspirations to take on leadership roles and become Members of Parliament. The Labour party, the Liberal Democrats and the Scottish National party agreed that late-night voting in Westminster—a topical thing to talk about, given that we were voting at midnight this week for no apparent reason—is a barrier to women’s coming forward. They said that voting could perhaps be organised in a different way. We often call it a family-friendly way, but I call it a human-friendly way, because I am not sure there are many individuals who think it is possible to work in the way we do without it having some impact on their capacity.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I thank the right hon. Lady for bringing this timely and hugely important debate to the Chamber. On the matter of voting, does she agree that there are models in the devolved nations?

Mrs Miller: I am still looking for more encouragement from the Minister that the Government will press forward on transparency and the collection and publication of diversity data. The Conservative party said it hopes to publish more data. The Liberal Democrats, the Labour party and the Scottish National party agreed that it would be helpful for the Government to bring into force section 106 of the Equality Act 2010, although the Labour party raised a number of issues about how the data would be gathered. Again, they said that it was the smaller parties’ fault that it was not being brought into force, so we thought we would write to the smaller parties and ask them whether it would be an enormous burden to enforce section 106 of the 2010 Act. So far, we have not been overwhelmed with negative responses. We will be looking at that issue further, and if the so-called smaller parties that are represented here today want to voice any opinions on that, that would be incredibly helpful. We will analyse how we can overcome some of those apparent problems through the drafting of secondary legislation. It is not beyond the wit or man—or indeed woman—to do that.

The issues that prevent women from thriving in business—I was at a conference this morning held by the Trades Union Congress talking about that very issue—include irregularity and the lack of certainty about what a business might ask of them. That is not just a problem for women; people generally want more certainty. Everybody would say that there is some latitude when we are debating incredibly important things such...
as the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. On those matters we need to ensure we are all there when we are needed to vote, but that is not necessary on every single piece of legislation and on things that are reporting time-specific. I hope the Government and their Whips Office are considering how they can make the way we operate in this place appear as if we are at least in the 20th century, if not the 21st century. Holding late-night votes on just any business should have gone out with the ark.

The other cultural issue that came up is the representation of women on party decision-making bodies. The Labour party, which gave evidence to us in November, aims to have a gender-balanced party conference and National Executive Committee—I am sure Labour Members understand what that means more than I do—but other parties were more uncertain about that. They all offered to write to us, and we will look carefully at their submissions, but if there is not gender-balanced representation on parties’ decision-making bodies, it is likely that having more women in Parliament will not be seen as such a pressing issue. I hope all parties will write to my Committee with their views on that.

The next issue that was raised—it is important to set this out in my opening speech—is the working environment here in Parliament. Clearly, impropriety in behaviour is still in the headlines this week. All parties have a code of conduct for Members of Parliament. Labour and the Conservative party have recently strengthened theirs, and all parties have been asked to write to the Committee outlining their procedures for reporting inappropriate behaviour. I look very positively at the way the parties reacted to earlier issues that were raised.

The final point, which is very important, is the abuse and harassment of parliamentary candidates. Although my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) is not a candidate, I was shocked at what she experienced this week. A coffin was put outside the parliamentary office in her constituency as part of a “family-friendly” event. People have to think very carefully about the abuse and harassment that parliamentary candidates experience. That sort of behaviour towards elected representatives has to be rejected. We asked the parliamentary parties to write to us to tell us how many party members have been expelled or suspended for abusing or harassing parliamentary candidates. We need a zero-tolerance approach. I applaud Members of all parties who stand up for their colleagues here, regardless of party.

In conclusion, the Select Committee is already working to follow up on the report, which we see as a continuing part of our work. This Parliament does not look like our country, in particular when it comes to women. Ninety-nine years ago this month, the first woman sat in the House of Commons 17 years ago—

Tulip Siddiq: You don’t look old enough!

Tulip Siddiq: I thank my hon. Friend. People would stare at me because they were not used to seeing, for a start, women under 5 feet, or loud-mouthed women of colour working in Parliament. I went on to work as a researcher, a press officer and a special adviser, and then left Parliament and came back as an MP.

In every layer of the party that I have described, whether special adviser, press officer or researcher, I always stuck out like a sore thumb. It fills me with a lot of pride and a sense of joy when I walk down the corridors now and see the difference in Parliament. Again, I will emphasise that we have not reached where we need to be, but there is no doubt about the big difference in Parliament now from what I saw 17 years ago.

My worry about the report is that the burden of progress seems to have been entirely assigned to political parties and that certain courses of action that could help, such as outreach programmes, are ruled out entirely out of hand. That concerns me. At a time of such major constitutional upheaval for the country, I feel that this place could show its determination to truly equip Britain for the future by putting women on an equal footing, and at a time when we are led by a female Prime Minister.

The recent oral evidence given before the Women and Equalities Committee revealed that entrusting political parties with that task will produce limited results. The Government should take the matter away from party bureaucracy, with all the delays and compromises that such a route entails—but their response to the report clearly rejects the imposition of targets, so I want to make a few alternative suggestions.

First, the prevailing culture in Westminster deters women from joining. Authorities must be up front about that and willing to take action when required. Secondly, outreach programmes must be considered as an apolitical way of making Westminster more attractive
not only to women but to black and minority ethnic communities. Thirdly, Parliament must be proactive about ensuring that equal representation is enshrined in the new democratic contests that take place—that is not only parliamentary elections, but mayoral or police and crime commissioner ones. We need improvement at all levels, in different kinds of elections.

Parliament needs to be proactive in fostering an environment that does not put people off—even before they have contemplated a career in public service. I am sure everyone in the Chamber will join me in expressing the horror that we felt about the accounts of harassment. Clearly we must deal with the aspects of this place that create a hostile environment for women. All parties working together on something we all care deeply about will deliver a confidential and independent complaints service and a procedure for victims to have their voices heard and their complaints dealt with properly. I hope that extends to people who visit the parliamentary estate, as well as those who work here.

When dealing with the cultural problems of the Commons, we must also look at the behaviour of Members in debate Members of all political parties. I accept not just one—and the bureaucratic structures that discriminate against women. As the Committee’s report notes, a 2015 survey from the Administration Committee explored experiences of working in Parliament, finding that “the unappealing culture of Westminster...deterred women from standing as parliamentary candidates.”

Whether that is hon. Members barking like dogs at women who are speaking in debates, or the centuries-old voting systems that prevent new mothers from representing their constituents, the authorities must accept the fundamental link between the prevailing culture of the Commons and the continued under-representation of women within it.

As an MP for a London constituency, I often speak at schools, including all-girls schools, where women will ask me whether it is uncomfortable being a young woman in politics. I always hesitate, because I do not know whether to tell them the truth and deter them from joining politics or to say, “Hand on heart, I believe this place is welcoming for young women.” I do not want to feel like that. When I go into a school and am questioned about whether I would encourage young women to come into politics, I want to be able to say with a clear conscience, “Yes, this is a welcoming place. Yes, here you won’t face any discrimination. Yes, it’ll be as easy for you as it is for the male student sitting next to you.” That is the problem I face in schools. We need to talk about this problem but at the same time, if students from Hampstead and Kilburn are listening: I do not want to deter you from coming into politics.

I also want to pick up a little on intersectionality. We are talking about women, but we cannot separate that from the fact that there is more discrimination against women of colour. That must be part of the debate if we want to secure equal representation in Parliament. We now have 51 BME MPs in the Commons, since the 10 who were elected at the 2017 general election. That increase is welcome, not least because it includes my hon. Friends the Members for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill), the first female Sikh MP, and for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), who is registered blind as well as being a woman and a woman of colour.

We have come far, but I still want to make another point. Especially in the context of this Parliament’s make-up, I want to look at an important part of Parliament: Select Committees. There are 28 departments and specified Select Committees in total. Only nine of the Chairs are women, and not a single Chair of a Select Committee is from a BME background. To me, in a Parliament like this, that is really shocking.

The number of BME MPs make up 7.8% of the new Parliament, which still does not reflect the population at large, where the figure is 14%. I come back to that Select Committee point, however: it is not just about having MPs in Parliament who are BME, but about what positions they hold. Are they party leaders, or in the Cabinet or shadow Cabinet? Are they the Chairs of Select Committees? The answer to the last question is: no, there are no BME Chairs of Select Committees.

To go back to the report, the rejection of quotas for women was disappointing, and so was the omission of a formal response to the Committee’s recommendation for Parliament to lead outreach initiatives. The Committee provided the Government with an opportunity to think boldly and to deliver an apolitical advocacy programme that could sell the virtues of life in Westminster to under-represented groups. By encouraging the political participation of traditionally marginalised and hard-to-reach groups, we can help to bring that focus to the forefront. In the end, diversifying candidates diversifies policies.

Mrs Miller: As a fellow colleague on the Select Committee, I thank the hon. Lady for her contribution to the work that we do. The educational outreach that Parliament does is fantastic, so one could argue that we already have an apolitical programme that Hopefully is encouraging young people to be MPs in future. What the Committee suggested was really just an extension of that, was it not?

Tulip Siddiq: Yes, and I pay tribute to the right hon. Lady as Chair of the Committee. The Committee works very well together and constructively, and its members are from all political backgrounds—people have different viewpoints, but we do a good job. She is absolutely right. What we want is an extension of something that already exists. We do not think it is a huge ask. I fear that, given the progress required, until statutory enforcement is seriously considered even for just an interim period, we will not achieve our goals.

I will not take up too much more time because I know that lots of Members want to contribute to this important debate. Speaking as an ex-councillor, representing constituents at ward level provided me with experience and the belief that I could go on to do that on a constituency-wide basis. As such, the Committee’s recommendation that the Government update the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002 to allow all-women shortlists for all elected mayoral and police and crime commissioner posts seems like a sensible proposal. The Government say that the evidence base for taking such a step is as yet under-developed. Since 2002, only two of the Labour party’s 18 elected Mayors have been women. The Select Committee report shows that, in every major party, less than 40% of councillors are women. The evidence base seems to be the opposite of underdeveloped.
The Government leave the door open by saying that they will consider the issue further. I hope they will do just that. In all the three areas that I have discussed, I truly hope that the Committee’s report will prompt the Government to take the lasting top-down steps required to deliver the equal representation that we are all hoping for.

I will be a bit cheeky and follow the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), who paid tribute to the Prime Minister. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle), because if it was not for her encouraging me to stand, and if it was not for the informal networks that are created among women who came to the House before I did, who told me over and over that I could be the MP for Hampstead and Kilburn, I would not be standing here today.

2.3 pm

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): It is grossly unfair to have to follow that speech. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I am delighted that my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) secured this debate. I need to begin with an apology: I was unable to get to the Exeter Union Centre for 2.50 pm, because the only college in my constituency is sending a big group of students down and I need to speak to them to convince them that this is a place they could come to.

I want to begin with a brief explanation of how I ended up on the Women and Equalities Committee and speaking today. I grew up in Birmingham with five brothers and I went to an all-boys school. I grew up in an Irish Catholic community that was constituted almost entirely of men who worked in the construction industry, so it is no surprise that I went on to study civil engineering at university and, after I graduated, I went to work on a building site. I managed to avoid virtually any contact with women—in a professional or other capacity—in college, at university and in the workplace until I was about 25 or 27. Then, I joined an American property company and about 70% of the people who worked there were women. That was a complete revelation. Having been brought up, not through any fault of my own, but through a lack of any meaningful contact with women in a subtle, subservient role—except of course my mother, who had been ruthless in ruling her six lads—I suddenly found that there were women employed right across the organisation at all levels of seniority, who in many cases were considerably more brilliant than any of the men I had met previously. I realised that there was something strange in the world as I had experienced it.

Up to that point, I had been conditioned in a particular way, and since then I have felt that it is my duty and obligation to speak out for women because the world is unfair and it needs correcting. I do not think that the world is unfair simply in terms of politics. In 1991, 3% of consultant surgeons in the UK were female. There has been a massive, transformational change since then; 25 years later, the figure is 11.1%. The University of Exeter did some work to see why that was the case. It is definitely not that women surgeons are any less committed than their male counterparts or any less dedicated or skilled at their trade; it is simply that they feel that they will pursue the career choice that seems to give them the best opportunity for success. According to the university, what they need is excellent role models, for them to see that it is possible for them to achieve that status.

The situation in the police obviously has to be much better—but no, unfortunately it is not. In 1995, which does not seem very long ago, the first woman chief constable, Pauline Clare, was appointed to Lancashire Police Force. What has happened since then? In 2016, out of 43 forces, there were four women chief constables. How can that be the case? It gets worse: the year before, there were eight. So what happened in the meantime? A few of those women decided to step down. Jane Sawyers, the Staffordshire chief constable, said:

“Either disproportionately female Chief Constables are less competent than their male counterparts, which is simply not the case, or there is something sexist about how female leaders are viewed.”

It is not just about representation in this House; women are unequally represented across several professions, and something has to be done. The butt of my case is that I do not think that quotas are the answer to that. Would hon. Members want to be operated on by a female surgeon who got the job because that hospital needed to achieve its quota of surgeons for that case? No, I do not think so. There are brilliant women surgeons out there; they can be appointed because of their brilliance, their ability and their dedication, but they do not need to be there because of quotas.

Hannah Bardell: The hon. Gentleman is making a very powerful and interesting speech. We may have the debate about the good, the bad and the indifferent, but does he not agree with quotas as a short-term measure to redress the balance? Are we really saying that more than 50% of the population are not able to do exactly the same jobs as men?

Eddie Hughes: Yes and no. I am absolutely not saying that women are not able to do as good a job as men. The clue to my disagreement is in the way the hon. Lady phrased the question, by saying “short term”. I do not want a short-term solution; I want a sustainable, long-term solution. I appreciate that it may seem naive and idealistic of me to view it that way.

I look at the Benches opposite and I am particularly terrified of the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler), because on Monday I will be on “The Politics Show” with her. I appreciate that she is an experienced, incredibly able Member, and I will look decidedly puny in political terms by comparison, so I am starting my preparation now in earnest and I hope that she has a bad day. I see members of the Women and Equalities Committee who I have grown to know over the past few months who are equally brilliant. I do not feel for one minute that the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) needed an all-women shortlist to get to that position.

Mrs Miller: May I say first how much my hon. Friend brings to the Women and Equalities Committee? His passion for these issues is apparent to everyone. He said that there is a cornucopia of women with the ability to do jobs—even in the construction industry. Does he not see that although we may have a large pool of capable women, they are not able to progress because of the way their competencies are judged? Does he agree that there needs to be a focus on removing barriers to women progressing? That might be done through all-women shortlists, which would not allow substandard people to come through, but would create a level playing field of opportunity.
Eddie Hughes: My right hon. Friend makes a very valid point, which I was kind of coming to. I maintain my resistance to quotas, but what can we do to change the situation? Well, I can do my tiny bit. I begin early: when I visit primary schools, I encourage women—young children—by saying, “You can aspire to be whatever you want to be.” Obviously, I represent a working-class constituency and I am a working-class lad. From a social point of view, I say to people, “You can become an MP. I’ve managed it and I’m happy to help you do it.” I can say to the girls in the class, “Look, we’ve had two outstanding women Prime Ministers, and I can point to several other examples who can be your inspiration and help you with your aspirations.”

We need to reach out to girls and encourage them, but we need to do that with lads as well. We need to say to them, “You need to understand that these girls sitting next to you are your equals.” That conditioning needs to start early. We need to destroy the stereotype of men being the breadwinners and women the carers. That needs to be dealt with at an early age. That will lead to a better society, not just by helping us with representation but by helping to reduce sexism and sexual harassment of women, because it will mean that men do not see themselves in the superior role that they may otherwise have been preconditioned to see themselves in.

We should encourage girls, and then we should back campaigns such as the 50:50 #AskHerToStand campaign. We should catch brilliant women early and encourage them to take part, but we must also ensure that men do their bit with regard to child rearing and parental responsibility. The Committee has done brilliant work on that. Imagine a future five or 10 years from now where it is completely normal for parenting duties to be shared equally between men and women. Having that engagement with their kids would be better for men and better for the kids, and it would mean a more equal playing field. In interviews, people would not ask themselves, “Can I recruit this woman? She may become pregnant and then she’ll have childcare responsibilities,” but would see men and women in parity and think, “It makes no difference whether I recruit a man or a woman—their obligations to the family will be the same.”

If we can level the playing field, we will go a long way to making it easy for women not just to become the brilliant parliamentarians of the future, but to run surgeries, to run our police forces and to contribute generally to society. There has to be parity. Women are amazing.

2.13 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes). I agree with much of what he said—not all, but he has given me some good food for thought and debate.

Like other Members, I will start by talking about my background. I was brought up by a single mother. My brother and I had very strong female role models. I often worried that he had few male role models, because my grandad died when he was eight, but he is now a proud father and partner and I can see that the female influence in his life has been hugely important.

It is important that we identify that the success of women and gender equality is as much for and about men as it is for and about women. It will benefit society.

I always think about the reports that I read following the banking crisis about the demographics of the people who made the decisions in that sector. We might say they were a very homogeneous group: they were the same race, gender and class, and they all looked at one another and did not see the faults in the system. I am not trying to blame the whole financial crash on men, but had there been more diversity—this is not my view; it is from the reports produced after the crash—there would have been different ideas and people would have challenged one another in different ways.

I think it is fair to say that the same applies very much to government, business and society. Where there is one type of people, they are more likely to agree than disagree. It is much better to have people of different religions, sexualities, genders and abilities around the decision-making table, because that makes for better decision-making processes.

I take the hon. Gentleman’s point about quotas and long-term solutions, but surely he recognises that structural challenges still exist for women who seek to get into positions of power. He referenced all-female shortlists. I will talk a little about what the Scottish National party has done in that respect, but all-women shortlists have brought us Members such as the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips). I cannot imagine her not being in this place and not being a vociferous champion of gender equality. I am sure she will be able to comment about this, but I have not seen anyone cast that up to her at any point. She is here and in her place, like many others.

I reflect on a comment by a friend who works high up in the corporate world. We met at an event in Parliament and she said, “Women will have equality when they’re able to get into positions of power in the same way as their average male counterparts have been able to.” This is somewhat derogatory towards men, but she said, “For generations, average men have got into positions of power. Women will have equality when they have the right to be just as average.” Let us not set the bar too low but say, “Actually, we can all be better, but there are structural challenges.”

I worked in the oil industry before I came to this place. Many decisions were made on the golf course, in the pub or in nightclubs. I remember going to an interview to be a sales representative and saying categorically that I was not willing to take clients to strip clubs as part of engagement. The response I got was, “Oh, well that doesn’t really happen any more,” but it was clear that it still happened. It was still common practice in the part of the sector that I was working in, and it was something that I was unwilling to do.

I did not get that job. I do not believe that was because of that comment, and I do not suggest that it was, but there were certain practices, and certain comments were made to me. I remember a sales guy I worked with saying to me about someone who was on maternity leave, “I don’t want that girl back in my team. How long is it going to be before she has another child?” I said, “Hang on a minute. Apart from that being completely illegal, how would you feel if someone said that to your wife and excluded her from the workforce?” He had obviously never considered that. He saw his opinion in a vacuum.

I came to this place largely because I had been involved in politics before. My colleague the former right hon. Member for Gordon, Alex Salmond, who I
worked for in a previous capacity, encouraged me to stand. In 2010, my mother stood unsuccessfully in the Livingston constituency for election to the House of Commons, so in 2015 I got the pleasure of beating the man who had beaten my mum five years before. I have to say that was a great experience. He was a really nice chap and we had a very respectful campaign, but beating the person who had beaten my mother was a proud moment, and I am proud to represent the constituency that I grew up in.

West Lothian is split into two Westminster constituencies and two Scottish Parliament constituencies, and 75% of the representatives of those constituencies—three out of the four—are women. Here is another interesting statistic: of the 12 candidates that the SNP has fielded in West Lothian for Holyrood and Westminster elections since 2007, nine have been women and three have been men, and we have not used any gender balancing mechanisms.

Let me summarise what the SNP has done in recent years. Members will all be aware that Nicola Sturgeon, the First Minister of Scotland, is a woman and has a gender-balanced Cabinet—one of less than a handful in the world. Scotland has very much led the way on that front.

At the SNP spring conference in March 2015, we passed a new mechanism to encourage more women to stand as candidates at the 2016 Scottish Parliament election: where an incumbent SNP constituency MSP announces their intention to stand down, the national executive committee may direct an all-women shortlist. That resulted in 43% of SNP MSPs being women—an increase from I think just over 20% in 2011. Similarly, we looked at all-women shortlists for local government elections where the party was standing more candidates than sitting councillors, and in a ward where the party had one sitting councillor, it stood two candidates, at least one of whom had to be a woman.

I am not saying that we are perfect by any stretch of the imagination—34% of our parliamentarians here at Westminster are female. It is incumbent on us all not just to look at this from a party structure perspective but, as the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) said, to look at this place. We look around this place in terms of its family-friendliness or female-friendliness, and we recognise that men and women are different in their approaches to work and atmosphere. I sometimes walk around the Palace and think, “It is not the most friendly place to work.”

I take the right hon. Lady’s point about the Lobby, our voting mechanism and being able to network, but surely we can find a way by which Members can discuss and relate to each other, other than through the voting Lobby. Votes take 15 minutes, and I think we have 10 votes coming up at the end of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill Committee. That will take us more than two hours. We can think about the time, effort and public money spent on drafting and tabling amendments to Bills, and I remember that there were hundreds of amendments to the Scotland Bill, but we are able to press only a handful of them to a vote. I wonder how much public money, time and energy is being wasted because we cannot press amendments to legislation to a vote because votes take so long. We are missing out on opportunities to amend legislation, and by extension our democracy is being affected.

Tulip Siddiq: I thank the hon. Lady for her speech. I have long argued for e-voting, because I believe that is the right way for us to go forward. Does she think it quite strange that the reason I was given for not introducing e-voting was that all Members need to be in the Chamber to listen to the debate—even though 650 Members of Parliament do not fit in the Chamber at the same time?

Hannah Bardell: The hon. Lady makes an excellent point; I am sure that irony is not lost on anyone here or anyone watching at home. We must look at those structural aspects. When there was a discussion about the refurbishment of the building, we suggested that perhaps it would be more financially efficient to build a new Parliament that was fit for purpose and turn this place into a museum. I know that is a controversial view, but at some point we will have to realise that this place does not reflect modern working practices in terms of the technological advances, e-voting and digital voting, however that comes. Even proxy voting is being considered for maternity and paternity leave. I remember seeing a Labour Member in the Tea Room during a vote breastfeeding her child. I thought, “This is absolute madness. This Member has had to travel from her constituency to vote—because it is such an important vote—and she has to bring her child with her.” I do not have any children—I would love to have children—but I think, “How would I manage that logistically?” It would be a huge challenge.

The Government have not accepted any of the report’s recommendations. That is disappointing. Surely they can find it in their heart, as a token of good will and progression, to take at least some of those sensible recommendations. The Fabwett Society said that, “37% of seats at-risk in the Boundary Review are held by women, which is substantially more than the percentage of women in Parliament—only 29.6%.”

Let us not forget that up until the previous Parliament, the number of men in each Parliament was greater than the number of women who had ever been elected. That is staggering.

We are in Westminster Hall, just across from the broom cupboard where Emily Wilding Davison hid on the night of the 1911 census. We can think about the struggle, and I often think about the representation of women and women’s suffrage in Parliament. The new art installation is fantastic, but some of those representations of the women’s movement and women’s suffrage are really subverted and subdued. More could be done in that regard.

I come to some of the most amazing women we have had in Parliament. It is 50 years since Winnie Ewing, our dear friend and colleague, was elected. We stand on her shoulders, and we can read the stories in her biography. Given that we are now sadly leaving the European Union—unless something dramatic happens; who knows?—she will be the only one who will have been a Member of this place, a Member of the European Parliament and a Member of the Scottish Parliament. That is a major achievement. I pay tribute to Winnie, because “stop the world, Scotland wants to get on” is a line that will live in infamy. I know it inspires many of us, and she has inspired many of us.
Women in the House of Commons 7 December 2017

We are the architects and the agitators of change. We should stand proud as women, and men who are supporting women to stand for election, but we must not pull up that ladder behind us; we must extend it out for the next generation.

2.26 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your stewardship again, Mr Sharma. I also give apologies: I have a train to catch heading north, so I need to be away by 3 o’clock.

Jess Phillips: Typical men!

Bill Grant: I have the dinner to make when I get home as well. First, I must advise of my CV. My mother was a woman and I married a woman as far back as 1970—that reminds me: it was on 19 December. I also have two daughters and one of my grandchildren is a lovely young lady. I am indeed a very fortunate individual.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), I went to an all-boys’ secondary school, which isolated me from the fairer sex—or the other gender. I also worked for 31 years in a male-dominated organisation: the fire service in Strathclyde. As a senior officer, I had the great privilege of working with a female deputy chief officer. It was a privilege to serve with her—I hope it was a privilege for her—and to improve that service. I welcome the involvement of women in male-dominated services such as the fire service and the police service, to which he referred.

Women in the House of Commons are welcome, but let us not legislate for gender balance, even in the short term. We saw good progress on female representation in the House of Commons in the 2017 election, with record numbers of female MPs elected: 208 in total, accounting for 32%. The Conservative party fielded a record 184 female candidates in the election, 32% of the total, which is an improving record that we are proud of. Labour, the SNP and the Liberal Democrats also had record numbers of female candidates in the election.

Some 51 years ago in 1966, when Harold Wilson won the election, there were just 26 female MPs. Today’s figure of 208 reflects, if my calculation is right, a 700% increase in those years. Some would say that is very good.

Jess Phillips: Does the hon. Gentleman know which party made the most progress and why that progress was made?

Bill Grant: The hon. Lady will be glad that I am not on her quiz team, because I do not know the answer. If she wishes to tell us—[Interuption.] I am sure she will. I think she would agree that that is significant progress over 50 years, but it is probably not fast enough.

The Conservatives have a great track record, having secured not one but two excellent female Prime Ministers. I am sure history will treat kindly their contribution to women in politics, both here in the United Kingdom and probably around the world. In Scotland, until recently, three key party leaders were female. That must be applauded, though the hat-trick has changed with the arrival of Labour’s new leader in Scotland, Mr Richard Leonard, with Ms Dugdale testing the water for a future in television. I think her excursion was relatively short-lived, but I wish her well.

I am pleased to advise of the Conservative organisation Women2Win, mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (MRS Miller), which was co-founded by the Prime Minister, ably supported by Ruth Davidson, my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) and many others. It is good to know that we have a passionate advocate for female representation resident at No. 10.

The way forward in increasing female representation in Parliament has no single solution, but in my view much of the remedy lies with political parties, not legislation. Each party must try to attract the right female candidates, giving them support and encouragement, as was said earlier on. The Conservative Women2Win is but one proud example. We must look, as was also mentioned earlier, to the pool of talent of people involved in politics. We all have phone bankers, leaflet deliverers, staff and door knockers, many of whom are female, who keep many local associations of all parties alive in our communities. They help to secure our seats here in Westminster. Let us encourage them and others from a whole range of backgrounds to come forward.

As elected Members, each of us has a role to play in ensuring that the working environment at Westminster is indeed welcoming and human-friendly, as was said earlier, and safe and secure for all who take on the challenge of public office. We must learn and move on from the recent barrage of allegations that undermine the good work of most parliamentarians of all parties.

Part of our role as elected parliamentarians is to be ambassadors for Parliament and to encourage female participation in our rich democracy. Having sat in Parliament for only a few months, I know female Members have a lot to give to democracy. Let us all contribute to a fairer and better Parliament, hang up the old school tie, if I dare say it, and strive for better progress in gender balance. Diversity can only strengthen democracy.

2.31 pm

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I want to pay tribute to all who have spoken, with some special tribute to my colleague the hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes). Like him, I grew up in a family in Birmingham. I have only brothers—obviously we make boy babies in Birmingham, because I also have two of those—and I grew up with an Irish heritage. I certainly have the same touch of the Blarney that he has. My experience and my views are different from his, but I know we have the same goal.

In case there is any question whether the Labour party feels that what happened in Totnes with a coffin was appropriate, I will self-appoint myself as spokesman for the Labour party and say that it is totally unacceptable to have political debate that leads to a Member of Parliament having a coffin put outside her office. It is especially unacceptable in regard to that particular Member of Parliament, who works tirelessly—often better than some members of the Labour party—to hold the Government to account. There is no question that she is fighting. If the Labour party had any involvement in that, I can only apologise whole-heartedly. It is totally unacceptable.
Stopping the cross-party love-in, I am disappointed that the Government did not listen to a single one of the recommendations of the Select Committee. If it had been me writing those recommendations, they would have been considerably more radical. I would have asked for the moon on a stick. The Committee’s recommendations were thoughtful, and it was not asking too much to recommend some of the outreach, as has already been pointed out. Some of the tiny changes to the Equality Act 2010, which would mean we could have all-women shortlists for mayoral and police and crime commissioner candidates, are the sweep of a single pen. They would not affect a single person in the Government even slightly, because their party does not recognise all-women shortlists anyway. They do not have to do it. We just want to, and we need the law to reflect that. If the Conservative party, the ruling party, does not think that quotas work, then it can crack on with that point of view. We in the Labour party know that they work. To answer the question asked by the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant), the progress was made as a result of the Labour party and all-women shortlists. They are the single biggest reason for progress.

Mrs Miller: I pay tribute to the work the hon. Lady does for the Committee, and she knows that I support the recommendations of the report. Is she not a bit disappointed that she feels her party needs all-women shortlists for mayoral elections in order to get female representation?

Jess Phillips: I feel utterly disappointed, but the triumph of hope over experience tells me that I have to force my party to look at electing women into the position of metro Mayors. The Conservatives want it too, but they are not willing to do it, whereas I am willing to say, “Yes, we have a problem. I have a solution. It will work.”

To speak to the point made by my hon. Friend, and I will say friend, the Member for Walsall North—is it north? It is all just the Black country to me—the idea that I would not want a surgeon selected via a quota to operate on me is not something I recognise. I would be no better; he would just have been somebody who had probably got the position because he went to a certain school or was born into a certain family. He would be no better; he would just have been given all the tools to allow him to become a surgeon or even to dream of becoming a surgeon. My hon. Friend will know, just as I do, that kids from Birmingham who have kissed the Blarney stone rarely end up being surgeons in Birmingham’s hospitals. I would be more than happy to be operated on.

To draw out the surgeon analogy, when somebody operates on me I expect evidence to have been taken about how they do that procedure. I want to know how they have come to the conclusion that that procedure is the very best thing for my health. I want to know that it is going to work, and I look for evidence. I want to see more women in Parliament, so I will look at the evidence of what works and I will ask that it is implemented. What works is quotas for women and sanctions when they are not realised. There is no other area of Government where we would just say, “Oh, do you know what really works to stop people being hit by buses? Oh, well, I’m just not sure it’s the one we want to go for,” or, “Do you know what really works for making sure that more kids go to school? But I just don’t know whether it’s good enough for choice if we do that.” We would not do that with any other thing, so why do we do it about this?

We look at clear evidence about the heavy lifting and the reason we have more women in Parliament now. In the last election, the Conservative party went backward. The Labour party surged forward. Do not get me wrong: the Labour party is in no way faultless in this area—I have just had to apologise for someone having a coffin left outside their house—but it is willing to do the thing that actually works, and to do it at every single level of the political party. It has to be balanced for every single person who sits on the National Executive Committee and for every person who goes to the conference. That is not because of people who want to claim they are great heroes of the movement. It is because of women in the Labour party fighting and bearing the scars.

Bill Grant: I note the comments about the negativity of the Conservative party. Here is a reciprocal quiz question: I wonder if the hon. Lady can explain why the party that seems to be quite restrictive on women is the party that has produced two wonderful female Prime Ministers, and yet no other party is following it?

Jess Phillips: I will query “wonderful”, in both regards. They are women. As somebody who grew up in the 1980s, I have to say that Mrs Thatcher does not deserve “wonderful”, but she does deserve credit for what she achieved. There are no two ways about it. The jury is out on the current one, because she is the head of the Government who have turned down the exact things that we are asking for.

Of course, there is a problem, and here I will show hon. Members something that I know works: admitting that we have a problem. The Labour party has a problem with having women in leadership positions. That is just a fact, and it is one I can see based on the evidence. There are all sorts of reasons for why that is, and it is partially because women in the Labour party—I feel awful saying this; present company excepted—do not defend the status quo; we are radicals who act for change. The reason our party has fallen short is because we are radicals.

It is very difficult to get people to vote for radicals or for things that would affect the actual status quo, so while it is amazing that the Prime Minister and the late Baroness Thatcher achieved what they have, to me they also very much represent the status quo. They did not challenge an established order. That is one of the reasons I think the Labour party struggles: our women would definitely upset the apple-cart, as they always have in our movement.

Hannah Bardell: The hon. Lady is making an excellent speech. Does she agree that the fact that somebody in power is a woman does not mean that they should be held to different standards from men? That seems to be part of the issue: as women in the positions we hold, we have a right to be good or bad in the same way that men have.
Jess Phillips: Absolutely. All politicians need to be cut a bit of slack, because we are only human and we will all make mistakes. However, if a woman makes a mistake, she is making a mistake for life. That mistake could be what she wore on her feet. Everybody knows what shoes the Prime Minister likes, but what shoes did David Cameron like? Probably boring posh ones, but nobody will ever comment on that. We are held to an entirely different standard.

For me, some of the recommendations in the report are really obvious and easy solutions. I understand that there may need to be a bit of give and take; we did not expect all the recommendations to be accepted, but for some to have been considered would have been nice. I will not speak for much longer because I recognise that we are running out of time, but in the Government’s response, the idea that political parties can solve this problem is either naive or is basically trying to kick the can down the road. Political parties are not good and equal institutions that rely only on fair play. They are places where power, patronage and position mean everything. Nothing more than the past few months has shown me that my political party, as well as every political party in this building, cares more about politics, power and position than it cared about, for example, my friend Bex.

To think that political parties have the will to do this themselves is basically to say that the problem has to go away on its own. They absolutely do not. They care more about by-election results than they will ever care about the problem of sexual harassment, for example. That was felt by everybody on the Committee when every single political party presented to it. Nobody will actually turn on their own in the end. That is why people think we are all the same and why they have no trust in us. I have to say, for the first time, as somebody who believes in this building so deeply, I am kind of with the people on the doorstep who say we are all the same. That is how it has felt for people like me since the sexual harassment scandal started in Westminster.

Mr Virendra Sharma (in the Chair): We are aiming to finish by 3 pm. I am quite flexible, Maria, if you are a little flexible on your side as well.

2.44 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the chair, Mr Sharma. I am not quite sure that that time limit will work for what I have here, but I will do the best that I can. I thank the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) for her speech and for her Committee’s work on its excellent report, and I thank all those who gave evidence to that Committee.

I share the disappointment of everybody who has spoken about the Government not taking on the recommendations. I hope that, now that we have a new Government, they may wish to revisit this and take another look at the recommendations, because they are good recommendations. I add to those who have talked about quotas, and I share their concerns: I suppose that quotas are not perfect or what we would want in an ideal world. However, we do not have an ideal world. Women are not equal to men in society—or in this building—so there has to be a disruptor to the selection process that starts to make the rules work a little bit more in women’s favour. If we leave it how it is, it will be a very long time before we actually see any change. Action on this is long overdue.

The right hon. Member for Basingstoke was right to talk about cultural factors and this building, the way it works and some of the behaviour that happens here. This is not new. My hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) referred to Winnie Ewing, who I will also refer to. Hers was one of the first political biographies that I read, and she reported that, in her time in this place, as the single female Scottish National party representative, she was “interrupted whenever I spoke, I was regularly insulted and I was even defamed once or twice...I was even stalked by a Labour MP”.

She describes that stalking in some detail, although she does not name her stalker. That behaviour continued when she became a representative in the European Parliament as well. It took the chair of the European Parliament to write to the Speaker here to tell off those Members who continued to harass and upset her when she was in the European Parliament, which is completely unacceptable.

We know that that behaviour has not changed in recent years. My former colleague, Dr Eilidh Whiteford, was threatened with “a doing” in 2011 by a then Select Committee Chair, which is absolutely inappropriate. She felt that she had to withdraw from that Committee as a result of that. As we have seen from recent news of harassments, that is still a problem. It is still an issue, and we cannot be blind to it—we need to act.

Other Members have talked about their own experiences. My experience is that I have been well supported by men and women both in the SNP and not in the SNP. Like the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq), I started as a local councillor, on Glasgow City Council. When I was first elected in 2007, the council was very male, pale and stale, and there was some very inappropriate behaviour by some of the older male councillors.

I had only been there for, I think, a matter of weeks before one of the male councillors thought it was appropriate to come up to my colleague and pat her on the stomach because he thought she was pregnant. She was not, but he should not have been doing that anyway; there is no need for that kind of behaviour. Some years later, when I was pregnant, a Labour councillor thought it would be appropriate, during meetings with other people present, to offer to deliver my baby. I made it perfectly clear how I felt about that kind of comment, but he persisted in making them because he knew I did not like it. There needs to be more challenging of those types of behaviours, because they are not funny; it is not a joke and it makes women feel uncomfortable.

I am glad to see that there has been progress in women’s representation in this place. In my own seat of Glasgow Central, none of the nine candidates were women in 2010, but three out of nine were women in 2015, and in 2017 it was the only seat in the country with an all-female candidate list. Progress has been made, but it is not enough. We need to think about how we support women when they get to this place. We need to look at maternity leave and support during pregnancy, and we need to look at family-friendly hours. We also need to look at even more radical things. I have suggested before that we should have a version of the French
suppleéant system, in which Members could have somebody to job-share with or fill in for them when they are not here.

We also need to look at the impact of the boundary review and whether we can do more about safe seats and incumbency. To help to address those issues, the SNP has taken the approach that if a male MSP stands down, there will be an all-women shortlist in that seat to fill that gap. The former Member for Ochil and South Perthshire, Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh, is our national women and equalities officer. She has done a huge amount of work to encourage women to stand; she runs a women's academy and is working to get women's confidence up. That confidence is so important. Men will often put themselves forward for things after looking at the job description and thinking, "Of course I can do that," when they can only do half of the things in the description. Women will look at the job description and think, "I couldn't possibly do that."

We need to encourage women to stand. We need to identify good women who have potential and ideas and things that they want to do to change the world. We need to get them to stand up and participate. We have seen a lot more female candidates coming forward in the SNP for council, which is a very important starting ground for people who want to get into politics and a very important part of politics. We need to support women in that. We cannot just encourage them and then take away any sense of structure. We need to keep that going over time and make sure that they continue to be supported.

We have some exceptional women in the SNP who I am very proud of. My hon. Friend the Member for Livingston mentioned her mum, Lis Bardell, who is one of the most wonderful and exceptional encouragers in the party, and fearsome with it. We have a responsibility and a duty to make change and to make sure that, as the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn said, women get here and then get into positions of power where they can help to make change. Select Committee Chairs have huge power to influence, change and set the agenda. Without women in those positions, nothing will change in so many different areas, particularly those where policy hugely affects women. I thank Members for their contributions to the debate.

2.50 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma, and to contribute to the debate.

As I have previously stated, 51% of the population are women, and the other 49% would not be here if it was not for the women, so arguing for 50:50 representation in Parliament is really quite reasonable. I am quite disappointed that the Government have not accepted any of the recommendations in the Women and Equalities Committee report. That is the problem with politics—people see that we say one thing and do something else, and it puts people off politics or politicians. If we truly believe in equality of representation, we must accept at least one of the recommendations, and that will make the Committee feel that it is doing a great job.

The report states:

"We are concerned that Parliament is failing to be a world leader on women's representation."

That is really important to consider as we debate Brexit and our standing in the world. It is important that we do not fall back. That alone should get people to sit up and listen to the debate we are having on representation in Parliament.

The right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) is an excellent Chair, and her Committee's report makes reference to the "inflexibility" of Parliament's working practices. How we vote in this place has been mentioned a number of times. I accept that there is value in us mingling in the Lobby when we vote, but once could be enough, and we could then vote electronically for the remaining 10 votes. There are ways we can improve the current system without losing some of its benefits.

We must also look at gerrymandering and the boundary changes. We will see a substantial loss of women representatives if the Boundary Commission's recommendations go ahead. The Fawcett Society found that 37% of those at risk are women. If that goes ahead, the loss to this place will be substantial.

Mrs Miller: I do not want to add a discordant note, but if there were an issue of gerrymandering, surely it is the fact that at the moment constituencies such as mine have 85,000 people in them, while constituencies in other parts of the country have only 50,000. Surely that is the gerrymandering that we are trying to get rid of with the boundary changes, which I fear will not go through because of a lack of cross-party support.

[MR LAURENCE ROBERTSON in the Chair]

Dawn Butler: The whole system is substantially flawed in how it counts the number of constituents, because it takes into consideration only people who are registered to vote, and not everybody who actually lives in the constituency. The right hon. Lady will find that constituencies such as mine—a London constituency—have a substantial number of constituents who are not registered. The whole system is flawed in terms of how the number is calculated, but it is not only that. The Labour party is set to lose more seats under the boundary changes than any other party, and we would therefore lose more women. That is where some of the gerrymandering comes into effect.

The report states:

"Our focus on women in this report should not be taken as a lack of interest in diversity more generally".

I accept that. When we look at achieving gender equality, we need to look at all kinds of women. My hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) referred to intersectionality in women of colour, who often get ignored or brushed out of the feminist argument. Even though we are looking at women, we need to look at the diversity of women. This is not confined to women of colour; it is also working-class women, disabled women, LGBT+ women, single women, single mums and so on. It is important that when we talk about women, we are not focusing on one particular group of women who are then the acceptable face of women generally.

On the theme of thanking women, I would like to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali), who replaced an awful misogynistic male. She was fundamental in my journey to get here.

The hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), who is no longer in his place, made quite a powerful speech, some of which I agreed with. I am sorry that he
is a little bit scared of me, but I am also quite pleased. I hope that his time on the Committee has brought him on a journey to understand that it is not that women are not capable of doing certain jobs or being in certain positions. It is often that barriers are put in women’s way that are not put in men’s way. It could be the old boys’ club, the secret handshake or what you drink down the pub. Certain barriers are put in women’s way, and that stops them more than their ability to do a job, which is often not the case. I said this at the Committee, but I will repeat it for those who were not there: I will know when we have reached real equality, especially in this place, when we have as many rubbish women as rubbish men. Then I will know that equality has really hit its peak.

The hon. Gentleman also spoke about conditioning people, and especially males, from a young age. That is all well and good, but the process of conditioning takes time—decades—and therefore we sometimes have to force that thought process. The way to force it is to have quotas or all-women shortlists or to make the decision makers more accountable. That is how we force conditioning or undo the conditioning that has happened.

More than 57% of women who have ever sat in the House of Commons have been Labour Members. All-women shortlists played a fundamental role in making sure we took that step forwards. To ignore the importance of all-women shortlists or the difference they make is to ignore the progress we often talk about in Parliament. It should not be ignored.

There has been a lot of talk about women in power. It is not just about women being in power; it is about women in power empowering other women. That is vital. We talk about the ladder of success. I like to think that when women are on that ladder, we lay the foundations for an escalator. If we are on that escalator of success, we lay the foundations for a lift, so that we make the journey of the woman coming behind us faster, smoother and easier, and we celebrate that fact. The fact that 86% of the cuts that our Prime Minister has presided over have affected women is a real disappointment for a woman in power.

Labour is seeking gender equality by 2020 or whenever the next general election is. It might be next year—who knows? The last general election was called quite quickly, so we did not have time to enforce all-women shortlists, but even then, the Labour party still achieved 45% of its Members being women. Of the 262 MPs, 119 are female. Labour has more female MPs than all the other political parties added together. That is something to celebrate and talk about. We cannot have this debate without acknowledging how far the Labour party has come.

In regard to black, Asian and minority ethnic representation, 32 out of the 52 are Labour MPs. Again, the fact that that journey has come about is fundamental to who we are as a party in regard to equality, but there is also a thought process and the measures that we have put in place.

Mrs Miller: The hon. Lady says that this is fundamental to what her party is about. It has had all-women shortlists for 20 years, yet her hon. Friend, the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) advocates—as my report advocates—that we should perhaps look at extending all-women shortlists, because, as her hon. Friend tells me, the Labour party is still finding it difficult to get women elected to mayoralties and as police and crime commissioners. Why has that not caused a culture change in the hon. Lady’s party if she says that it is part of its culture in the first place?

Dawn Butler: It is a fact that we have two police and crime commissioners who are women in the Labour party. We could do better in regard to elected Mayors, but the need to do better does not negate the fact that we are doing better than the Conservative party, the Lib Dems or any other party. I concede that we need to do better, can do better and must do better, but that does not in any way negate what we have done or mean that we should not celebrate the fact that the Labour party has done so well. As much as that might grate, it is a fact.

The game changer was all-women shortlists. What I often hear, especially from the Conservative party, is, “We want the best person for the job,” or, “We want the best man for the job.” Sometimes the best man for the job is a woman. The best person could be a woman. I find quite irritating the assumption that a woman getting the job is not the best person for the role.

On the whole, I commend the report. It insists that the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority conduct an equality impact assessment, which I think is fundamentally important. I hope the Minister will talk about equality impact assessments and how important they are for analysing what happens and who is affected. I hope that the Government will take equality impact assessments on board in all their policies because, at the end of the day, all the women who are in this place stand on the shoulders of other women who fought really hard, who died and who shed blood, sweat and tears—literally. It is important that we ensure that whatever we produce from this House emboldens and empowers society as a whole, but in particular women.

3.3 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Cabinet Office (Caroline Nokes): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Robertson, and, indeed, to be back in this Chamber after a gap of a considerable number of months. I apologise if I am somewhat rusty. I have often said—and I believe that the Chairman of the Select Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), shares the view—that sometimes Parliament is at its best in Westminster Hall, when we are speaking in a consensual and cross-party manner. I think that I recently followed my right hon. Friend, in successive weeks, on “The Politics Show South”. I heard her say one week that she felt that Parliament was at its best when it worked on a cross-party basis in Westminster Hall, and I repeated that the following week. I am sure that the viewers of the BBC’s “Politics Show South” programme found us slightly tedious, but never mind. We have seen elements of that consensus today. Right hon. and hon. Members, including those who may have spoken and then had to leave, raised a number of really important points, many of which I will struggle to disagree with.

Of course, I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing the debate, and all the members of the Select Committee on an excellent report. Unsurprisingly, I have had the opportunity to read and reflect on it and, indeed, the Government response this week.
The issue of diverse representation in Parliament was last discussed in this Chamber just three months ago, in a debate led by my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies). I am sorry that she was unable to be here today, because I also had the opportunity to read the record of that debate and the many important and pertinent comments that both female and male Members of the House made about their struggles to get here and, indeed, some of the challenges that we all face when we are here.

I echo the comment that my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke made about how well Hampshire has done in securing female representation. I believe that we lead the way on diversity, in terms of both gender and BAME representation. We are doing brilliantly on that, but I cannot necessarily point to the reasons why. Back in September, the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) made a similar comment about why she could not necessarily share all the secrets of why Livingston and West Lothian had done better than other parts of the country in securing both female representation and female candidates. I was struck by the comment about the constituency that was, I think, the only one in the country with an all-female line-up at the last election.

I was talking about Hampshire. When my right hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt), my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Caroline Dinenage) and I arrived here in 2010, I was struck by the tales from my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke about how miserable this place had been when there were only 17 female Conservative Members. That increased to nearly 50 in 2010, and today it is nearly 70. We now have my hon. Friend. Friends the Members for Fareham (Suella Fernandes) and for Eastleigh. Between 2015 and 2017, we also had my former hon. Friend Flick Drummond, then Member for Portsmouth South, whom we all very much miss and would like to see back here.

As my ministerial colleagues have made clear in their response to the report and, indeed, in various debates in the House, we want more progress, and that means a gender-balanced and therefore representative House of Commons. I was struck by comments, which none of us would disagree with, that this would be a better place if we had better gender representation. There is certainly real aspiration—we have heard some today—on both sides of the House to find talent in the broadest cross-section of society. That should also be the case in our local councils, where women are represented similarly to how they are here: they hold only one third of elected positions and comprise only 17% of council leaders.

Local government is often seen as, and indeed is, a pipeline for talented people who might aspire to come to this place. Looking around the Chamber, I can see people who have been representatives on local authorities, as I was, and who, either by accident or design, found themselves on a trajectory that brought them to Westminster, but I argue that there are woefully low numbers of female council leaders and councillors. If we are to look at local government as our pipeline, we simply cannot take it for granted.

Earlier this week, my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke hosted an event entitled “Ask Her to Stand”. That is such a crucial part of this. Whether we are male or female Members of the House and whether we are members of large parties or small ones, we all have a responsibility to find women who are interested and active, to encourage them to develop and to foster their talent, so that they have the confidence to come and occupy the same positions as we do. It is a real privilege to be here, and we have to find constructive and positive solutions to some of the more challenging aspects of the job.

I often spend time encouraging women I meet to think about standing, but I was really struck by the comments of the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) when she was asking what she should say to young girls in her constituency: should she look them in the eye and tell them that this is the greatest place to work, or should she be honest? It is a really difficult question. I had some young girls from St James’ Primary School in Bermondsey come in here a few weeks ago as part of the “I Can Be” project, and they asked me whether this was a great place to work and whether I loved every minute of my job. I was honest, but I said that the same is true of any job: you will love bits of it and hate bits of it. That is very true in Parliament, but there are some environmental factors. Many Members have referred to both the environment and the culture. I told those six-year-old girls that we have to modernise, and if modernisation can bring with it the removal of the mice, I for one will be a very happy Member of Parliament.

Virtually every Member has spoken about the cultural issues in this place, and I can argue with none of the comments made, especially on voting at midnight. I was going to describe an impromptu surgery, but it was not a surgery. I sat in the Lady Members’ Room between 10 and midnight on Monday and the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn was there for part of the time. I confess I was asleep for some of the time. I talked to some senior Members from her party about what we could do to make this place more attractive. I will give credit to the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown), who was particularly honest in some of her views. She was right: it is a nonsense that we are here voting at midnight on occasion. Although the issues are serious and important, can any of us attest to being at our best at midnight? I certainly am not, and the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn can attest to the fact that about two minutes before the vote I was fast asleep, and probably snoring.

We have a long way to go and I am conscious that I have many words that I want to say but will probably not get through all of them.

Hannah Bardell: I thank the Minister for giving way, and for her comments. One of the cultural issues that we touched on in our report was the representation of women and female parliamentarians in the media—the abuse and attention that we often receive. Speaking for myself, I have not received a huge amount of that, but some of my colleagues have. When we look up at the members of the Lobby during Prime Minister’s Question Time, which is about the only time the Press Gallery is ever full, we see how scarce women are among them. Some of the challenge is in the Lobby and in those who report on our parliamentary work. Does my hon. Friend agree that we must do more to ensure that there are more women—and greater diversity—in the media?
Caroline Nokes: Do you know, I really thank the hon. Lady for those comments. The hon. Member for West Ham told me that I would be a coward if I did not stand up in Westminster Hall today and say that part of the problem was the media. The hon. Member for Livingston makes an absolutely valid point about the pale, male and stale nature of those that we see in the Lobby during PMQs. Other hon. Members have mentioned shoes. I cannot appear on the media without being told that I need to lose weight and wear longer skirts. Whose business is that other than mine?

The hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn made a highly relevant point about Select Committee Chairs. We have a brilliant female Select Committee Chair sitting with us today. However, across the other Select Committees there are too few women Chairs. I remember receiving one of those round-robin emails that we all receive when it is Select Committee election time, from the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) when she was standing to be Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee. I cannot pretend that she is one of my friends—I barely know her. She sent me an email asking me to support her in that election and I simply replied, “There is one thing that is absolutely certain in an election. If there is not a woman on the ballot paper, a woman will not get elected. By the way, that means I will of course vote for you.” That is an important point. Even when women get to this place, they appear to be somewhat reluctant, for whatever reason, to put themselves forward.

Two of my hon. Friends have left the Chamber. My hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) told us a fantastic tale about his all-male upbringing and his background in the construction industry. Even in the construction industry, one can sporadically meet really inspirational women. I attended a reception a couple of months ago, which gives me a brilliant opportunity to mention two female directors of the company Saint-Gobain, who talked to me about the challenges that they face in the construction industry. They looked around this place and said, “It’s not as bad as here, though.” They made a really valid argument.

The hon. Member for Livingston gave us a fantastic insight into Livingston’s proud tradition. She made a valuable point about the banking crash and the evidence that, had there been more women, there would have been different experiences and different challenges, and we all know that that leads to different decision-making processes. I was delighted to hear her reference to “New Dawn”. I was the Chair of the Speaker’s Advisory Committee on Works of Art when we unveiled “New Dawn”. I wish I could say I had been the Chair when it was commissioned, but I cannot claim that. It was brilliant to have a modern 21st-century piece of art in the Palace itself. Too often the modern art is shunted over into Portcullis House, but we and the artist Mary Branson found a great space where we could celebrate and commemorate the journey that so many women have been on to bring us here today.

The hon. Lady mentioned ladders, and the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) mentioned ladders, escalators and lifts. She is right. Too often there have been women who can all point to of women who have pulled up ladders behind them, which is not the way we should go. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has taken a bit of stick today, but I want to share with Members just one tale of a woman who was prepared to get up a ladder in 2010 to launch my general election campaign in the Romsey and Southampton North constituency. I did not think she would go up that ladder to unveil the poster that we had stuck 10 feet up a wall, but she did. She has been an inspiration to many of us and has been prepared to knock down and do some pretty heavy lifting when it has been called for.

I am going to destroy the career of the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) by telling the House how much I love her and her outspokenness and the fact that she has been determined to keep banging the drum through some difficult and trying times. She was right to mention that we have to be prepared to admit when there is a problem. Former Prime Minister David Cameron was quite candid. When he was leader of the Conservative party before he became Prime Minister in 2009, he confessed that the under-representation of women and ethnic minorities was, “a real problem for Parliament and it’s been an even greater problem for my party”.

I know that is 100% accurate because I lifted that out of the report and scribbled it down diligently. We have to be more open and candid. I do not pretend that I have all the solutions—I certainly do not—but the message that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Women wanted me to convey is that she is listening to opinions and wants to do more.

I appreciate the disappointment that Members have expressed today about the response to the report. I do not pretend that I am on the easiest pitch trying to defend that—I am clearly not. As I said at the beginning, we approach this in a determined, cross-party and consensual way. The Government Equalities Office has taken a robust approach with business, encouraging organisations to think differently about what they can offer employees, developing strategies to retain and encourage women. The same must apply to the political parties who have to tackle the issue of workplace gender diversity with the same vigour that we are asking of the civil service. As the Minister with responsibility for the civil service in the Cabinet Office, I am conscious that we have some great strategies on returnships and retaining women in the workforce, but that is very much about a variety of solutions in a variety of different places.

I am not sure how much more tolerance people will have for me rambling on. There was a determination that we would speak for only an hour and a half, which I have clearly bust through badly. We have to focus on what the individual parties can do to address the problems. I think that focus is absolutely right. Today has been quite positive and constructive. Just as individual businesses require innovative and niche solutions to their own workforces, so do political parties, and they are best placed to know how to leverage the change within them. Different parties take different approaches to encouraging women’s participation and selecting candidates because they are largely starting from different points.

I was struck by the intervention of the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley on my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant), who has now gone. I knew the answer to the question was women-only shortlists. I knew that they had a massive impact in 1997 and I know it was the Labour party that achieved that. I am clear on that. I am also clear that in most political parties individual constituency associations
are autonomous bodies that are absolutely determined to retain control over the selection of candidates, in the same way as I know that Romsey in 2002 was absolutely determined to pick somebody of its own choosing. The same is true for Basingstoke, for Brent Central and for Birmingham, Yardley. We have to allow the parties to have structures that allow those associations to have autonomy. A one-size-fits-all solution will not give us the answer.

I want us to remain open and collaborative, and to talk about successes and what has and has not worked. There is clearly much that we can learn from each other. That is why the Government Equalities Office is commissioning an evidence review, which will encompass the range of approaches taken here and internationally to increase women's representation. The aim is to provide political parties with a range of possible solutions on which they can draw. That will be supplemented by some qualitative research with women and men in Parliament, to demonstrate the range of experiences, career paths and skills that Members bring to their role. I want it to be clear to prospective candidates that it is just such diversity of experience that makes this place truly democratic.

Turning to the future, next year there will be a great opportunity, when we celebrate the centenary of women's inclusion in the electorate and in Parliament, to set a marker in the sand from which we cannot roll back. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Women will be convening expert academics and colleagues throughout 2018 to establish our aspirations as shared action. I know that she has already approached a number of colleagues here, and will continue to work with them and with peers in the other place. In the light of the new challenges that we face, such as online abuse, which has been mentioned this afternoon, and the constantly evolving role of parliamentarians, we must look towards next year as an opportunity both for an exciting celebration and for addressing some of the difficult aspects of 21st-century politics.

I thank hon. Members for their contributions. I believe we are all working towards the same aim, and I hope that they will continue to use the privilege of their position here, as I shall, to sustain momentum. Those of us with a deep commitment to diversity will champion the issues in our parties. We must do so with vigour and determination. Each of us is a role model for young people who are thinking about what they want to be when they grow up. That is a privileged and special position to be in. I suspect that the majority of our constituents do not know what brought us to this place, or where we worked before. Perhaps we have a responsibility to explain that journey to them, to tell them about the privilege of being part of what I would argue is the world's greatest democracy, and to encourage more of them to come forward and stand.

3.22 pm

Mrs Miller: It is wonderful to see you in the Chair this afternoon, Mr Robertson. I thank everyone who has taken the opportunity to come and contribute to the debate, and particularly the Minister for giving such a positive response. It is heartening to hear that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Women is undertaking an evidence review. We will all welcome that, and we will welcome her involvement, and that of the Minister, in finding a way forward. It is not a choice; it is a necessity. We need better gender representation and diversity in Parliament. It is the responsibility of us all, and such debates help to move the issue forward. I assure all the Members present for the debate that the Women and Equalities Committee will continue to look at the issue in detail.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Fifth Report of the Women and Equalities Committee, Women in the House of Commons after the 2020 election, Session 2016-17, HC 630, and the Government Response, Cm 9492.

3.23 pm

Sitting adjourned.
The review sought to provide assurance of the continuing need for the National Heritage Memorial Fund (NHMF), including its activities operating as the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), and to identify opportunities to strengthen its effectiveness, efficiency and governance. The review concluded that the organisation’s functions of distributing national lottery funding and providing a fund of last resort for heritage at risk of loss to the nation remained vital, and should continue to be delivered in the current model of a non-departmental public body.

The review found that HLF’s role in distributing funding for heritage was seen as crucial to the conservation of heritage assets, to engaging communities across the UK with their heritage, and to providing support for heritage organisations to survive and thrive. While HLF has a good reputation in the sector, the review found scope for it to become a more strategic organisation by clarifying its priorities; strengthening its partnerships with other heritage organisations and national lottery distributors; using its data more effectively; and focusing on supporting the sustainability of the heritage sector and heritage assets, including by supporting skills capability in key areas such as digital engagement.

The review also recommended that HLF focus its efforts to promote inclusion and diversity by developing a strategy for engaging underrepresented groups and by streamlining its grant application processes. While HLF is a relatively lean organisation, the review supported its efforts to become more efficient, including by reducing its estate, developing an internal digital strategy, and ensuring its consultant network—the register of support services—is cost-effective. Additionally, there are recommendations for the Governments of the UK to clarify priorities for the heritage sector, to update the policy directions given to HLF, and to work with HLF to promote the intrinsic, economic and social value of heritage.

The review was carried out by DCMS with input from the Scottish Government, Welsh Government and Northern Ireland Executive given the UK-wide nature of NHMF/HLF. The review was carried out with the full participation of NHMF/HLF, and an independent challenge panel was appointed to assure its robustness and impartiality. The review gathered evidence from a range of stakeholders from across Government, from the cultural and natural heritage sectors and others with an interest in heritage, and through a public consultation. I would like to thank all those who contributed evidence to the review.
TRANSPORT

Drones Update

The Minister for Transport Legislation and Maritime (Mr John Hayes): My noble Friend, the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Transport (Baroness Sugg) has made the following statement.

Today I am setting out new measures the Government are taking to ensure the UK remains at the forefront of the exciting and fast-growing drones market, while putting the correct legislative framework in place to guarantee it is also safe and secure.

As the Government’s industrial strategy sets out, we have the potential to cement our status as the leading location where technology companies want to build their businesses, where scientists and engineers drive innovation and where investors want to invest. Drones are an important part of this emerging industry.

Our police, fire and search and rescue services all now regularly use drones in emergency situations to help save lives. Drones are also being used to inspect and maintain key national transport infrastructure—reducing the risk of accidents and driving industry productivity and efficiency.

UK drone companies are exporting their services across the world, showcasing Britain as a leader in innovative services and generating productivity and growth across a range of sectors.

The potential for expansion is significant, but this is an advancing and developing industry which faces a number of challenges. If we are to realise the full potential of this new technology, we must also maintain our world class aviation safety record and address certain safety and privacy concerns.

In response to our consultation on drones, we committed to a review of the current powers available to law enforcement agencies. My Department has been working with the police, the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice. This review has highlighted some gaps, reflective of how aviation technology is being used in such a broad and varied way across many industries and by the public.

This can pose extra challenges for the police when investigating and prosecuting crimes, and when carrying out their duties to protect safety and security more generally.

As such, we will look to include in our draft Bill new police powers where drone users would need to produce registration documents on request, ground a drone safely in certain circumstances and address certain safety and privacy concerns.

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As such, we will look to include in our draft Bill new police powers where drone users would need to produce registration documents on request, ground a drone safely in certain circumstances and address certain safety and privacy concerns.

Finally, I want to update Parliament on progress with Project Chatham. This is the data project we announced in our consultation response to improve geo-fencing—when drones can be restricted from entering into ‘no-fly zones’ using the drone’s inbuilt GPS to find its location and prevent it from continuing if it approaches a restricted zone.

A group comprising departmental experts, the Civil Aviation Authority, and NATS (the national air traffic service provider), has been set up and is progressing well. To implement geo-fencing effectively this group is looking at how we release information on the UK’s airspace restrictions in a format that manufacturers and tech developers can easily use.

We are working to have a sample set of data ready for wider engagement with stakeholders by spring 2018. When fully developed, the data will help drone users fly safely in accordance with the rules.

Our approach will keep Britain at the forefront of the global market, while delivering a flexible framework for a safe, secure and successful drones industry.

[HCWS269]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Benefits and Pensions Up-rating 2018-19

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Caroline Dinenage): I am pleased to announce the proposed social security benefit and pension rates for 2018-19. I will place a copy of the proposed benefit and pension rates 2018-19 in the House Library. The annual uprating of benefits will take place for state pensions and most other benefits in the first full week of the tax year. In 2018, this will be the week beginning 9 April. A corresponding provision will be made in Northern Ireland.

The annual uprating process takes into account a variety of measures:

- The basic and new state pension will be increased by the Government’s ‘triple lock’ commitment, meaning that they will be uprated in line with the highest of prices, earnings or 2.5%—in this case CPI at 3%.

- The legislative requirement for the pension credit standard minimum guarantee is that it is increased at least in line with earnings. However to protect the poorest pensioners, the pension credit standard minimum guarantee will be uprated by the same cash amount as the rise in the full rate of the basic state pension.

- Benefits linked to the additional costs of disability, and for carers, are increased by the annual rise in prices, as reflected in the Consumer Prices Index (CPI). A number of other elements—including Non-Dependant Deductions (NDDs)—will also be uprated in line with prices.

- The majority of ‘working-age’ benefits have been frozen at their 2015-16 levels for four years under the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016.

The list of proposed benefit and pension rates also includes a change to the carer’s allowance earnings rule, which will be increased for 2018-19 from £116 to £120 a week.

Attachments can be viewed online at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-11-27/HCWS268.

[HCWS268]
Written Statements

Tuesday 28 November 2017

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley): The Education, Youth, Culture and Sport (EYCS) Council took place in Brussels on 20 and 21 November 2017. The UK’s Deputy Permanent Representative to the EU represented the interests of the UK at the Youth, Culture and Sport sessions of this Council.

Youth

The Council achieved a general approach among EU member states on the proposals laying down the framework for the European Solidarity Corps. The UK voted in favour of the general approach, which achieved almost unanimous support. The Commission commented on how they would consider the expansion of geographical scope of the Corps, which is an important matter for the UK. Members also unanimously agreed to adopt draft Council conclusions on Smart Youth Work.

The main policy debate focused on the issues that matter to young people and possible European efforts to address these issues. The debate was positive, with the UK setting out the importance of hearing directly from young people about the issues that matter to them, as well as highlighting the important work of the British Youth Council. The Commission also provided information on a new narrative for Europe, which further emphasised the importance of giving a political voice to Europe’s youth.

Culture/Audio-visual

Draft Council conclusions on promoting access to culture via digital means, were adopted by the Council with the UK supporting their adoption.

On audio-visual, the presidency provided an update on the Audio-visual Media Services Directive (AVMSD). This update acted as the first reading since a general approach was achieved at the last EYCS Council in May 2017. The discussion focused on the progress thus far of Trilogue discussions between the Council and the European Parliament. Crucial areas of agreement thus far between the EP and Council included the provision of greater access of online digital content to people with disabilities. The UK emphasised how it can be a valuable asset as discussion progressed with the EP.

A policy debate on the role of culture in building cohesive societies in Europe, and a later item on remaking Europe through culture, put forward by the French delegation, emphasised a number of important themes including cultural heritage, using culture to integrate migrants, and the mobility of artists. The UK’s position, in line with the spirit of the discussion, was supportive of the role culture plays in building community cohesion, raising the importance of tourism, and how creative and cultural exports shape the way member states, and the EU as a bloc, are viewed by the rest of the world.

Information was provided by the German delegation on the current legislative proposal regarding, the regulation on the import of cultural goods. This focused on the responsibility of member states to better regulate the illicit trade of cultural goods as a means to prevent such trade funding terrorist activities. The UK did not comment on these proposals, however my Department and HM Revenue and Customs continue to work with the EU in developing this file. In addition to this item, information was provided on international cultural relations, cultural property, and the role of the EU in the defence of cultural heritage crisis areas.

Sport

The Council session on sport led with a policy debate, covering the main challenges facing sport in the 21st century and co-operation between the EU, Governments, and the sport movement. The debate highlighted the crucial role of sport for society as a whole and the importance of protecting the autonomy and integrity of sport. The UK’s intervention emphasised how we are ensuring all citizens can access sport, targeting the least active in society. We also drew attention to the work that the UK Government are doing to combat corrupt practices in sport, through our Code for Sports Governance and our work alongside the International Olympic Committee to develop an “International Partnership Against Corruption in Sport”. Council conclusions on the role of coaches in society and a Council resolution on the EU structured dialogue on sport were adopted, with the UK supporting both items.

The Bulgarian delegation provided information regarding the meeting of the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) Foundation Board in Seoul on 16 November. The Polish delegation then announced the 2019 World conference on doping in sport to be held in Katowice, and provided an informal invitation to member states. There was also information from the Greek delegation on supporting the Olympic Truce during the Winter Olympic Games, to be held in Pyeongchang, South Korea in 2018.

Other

The Council received information from the Bulgarian delegation, as the incoming presidency for the first half of 2018, setting out their work programme for the next six months. They highlighted a number of priorities for their presidency including:

- continuing to move forward with the revision of AVMSD;
- moving to the next stage of discussions on the EU Solidarity Corps, while focusing on the role of young people in peacekeeping and security;
- highlighting the importance of cultural heritage and strengthening international relations through culture; and
- fighting doping through information and education of young people.

The next Council is scheduled for 22 and 23 May 2018.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

November Agriculture and Fisheries Council

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): I represented the United Kingdom at the Agriculture and Fisheries Council on 6 November in Brussels.

The Council opened with member states responding to the presidency’s questions on the sustainable use of pesticides. There was widespread agreement that national action plans are a good way for member states to tailor...
The agriculture ministers of the Visegrad group member states welcomed the European Commission’s report on the sustainable use of pesticides, highlighting that integrated pest management is the key to future crop protection. The presidency outlined the conclusions of the sustainable soil management conference held on 4-6 October in Tallinn, which highlighted the importance of managing soils and designing policies based on a strong evidence base. Responding to questions posed by the presidency, the UK informed Council that soil health goes hand in hand with farming productivity. Commissioner Hogan then updated the Council on EU agricultural trade.

“Three further items were discussed under ‘any other business’:

- The Slovakian and Czech delegations thanked Council for co-operation on the issue of dual quality foodstuffs.
- The agriculture ministers of the Visegrad group member states informed Council about the renewable energy directive post-2020.
- The agriculture ministers of the Visegrad group member states informed Council about the BIOEAST initiative.

On 23 June 2016, the EU referendum took place and the people of the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union. Until exit negotiations are concluded, the UK remains a full member of the European Union and all the rights and obligations of EU membership remain in force. During this period the Government will continue to negotiate, implement and apply EU legislation. The outcome of these negotiations will determine what arrangements apply in relation to EU legislation in future once the UK has left the EU.

[HCWS278]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION
EU Exit: Release of Sectoral Reports

The parliamentary under-secretary of state for exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): Following the Opposition day debate motion on 1 November, the Government committed to making arrangements to respond to the motion which called on the Government to provide the Committee on Exiting the European Union with impact assessments arising from the sectoral analysis they have conducted with regards to the list of 58 sectors referred to in the answer of 26 June 2017 to written question 239.

On 27 November the Department for Exiting the European Union provided analysis covering these 58 sectors of the economy to the House of Commons Committee on Exiting the EU and the House of Lords European Union Committee. The reports were also shared with the devolved Administrations on the same terms.

As the Government have previously made clear, the information requested in the motion does not exist in the form requested. During the Opposition day debate I told the House “there has been some misunderstanding about what this sectoral analysis actually is. It is not a series of 58 impact assessments.” The Secretary of State for Exiting the EU also made this clear before the House of Lords EU Committee on 31 October and to the House at DEXEU oral questions on 2 November.

The reports cover:

- a description of each sector;
- the current EU regulatory regime;
- existing frameworks for how trade is facilitated between countries in this sector, and;
- sector views.

We now consider the motion of 1 November 2017 to have been satisfied.

[HCWS277]

November General Affairs Council

The parliamentary under-secretary of state for exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): I represented the UK at the General Affairs Council (GAC) meeting in Brussels on Monday 20 November, in place of Minister of State Lord Callanan. The main items on the agenda were: preparations for the December European Council on 14 and 15 December; a follow-up to the October European Council; legislative programming, with the Commission presenting its 2018 work programme; the implementation of the inter-institutional agreement; and a roadmap of the European semester.

A provisional report of the meeting and the conclusions adopted can be found on the Council of the European Union’s website at:

Preparation of the European Council, 14 to 15 December 2017

The presidency presented the annotated draft agenda for the December European Council, which included defence; social issues, education and culture; and migration.

On the defence agenda item, the Council welcomed a discussion of both PESCO (Permanent Structured Co-operation) and EU-NATO co-operation. I intervened to agree on the importance of EU-NATO co-operation. I also stressed the need for third country participation in PESCO and welcomed early sight of the accompanying Council decision.

Ministers also welcomed the agenda item on social, education and culture following on from the Gothenburg social summit on 17 November. The outcomes of this meeting would provide the basis for Council conclusions. I confirmed the UK’s ongoing commitment to education and culture, as set out in the Prime Minister’s Florence speech and agreed on the importance of mobility and exchange programmes such as Erasmus.

Under the migration item, Ministers welcomed a discussion of both internal and external aspects of migration which would be discussed by leaders over dinner.

October European Council follow-up

The presidency and Commission highlighted the need to address the funding gap for the EU Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) for projects in Libya. I emphasised the UK’s significant bilateral contributions to Libya, which contribute to EUTF outcomes.

Legislative programming—Commission’s work programme (CWP) 2018

Following a presentation by the Commission, Ministers exchanged views on the CWP. These views will determine the Council’s input for the joint declaration between the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission on legislative priorities for 2018 and the first few months of 2019. I intervened to express support for open, flexible markets which lead to prosperity and strong economies. I also reiterated the UK’s unconditional commitment to ensuring European security.
The presidency provided an update on the implementation of the interinstitutional agreement, particularly with regards to international agreements, delegated and implementing Acts and the transparency register. Meanwhile, the Commission explained the role of the new task force on proportionality and subsidiarity, as set out previously by Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker in his State of the Union speech.

**FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE**

**Developments in Zimbabwe**

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): Since I updated the House on 15 November there have been historic developments in Zimbabwe. Robert Mugabe’s 37-year rule came to an end on 21 November, sparking joyous celebrations as Zimbabweans looked forward to the opportunity for a brighter future.

The UK’s objective has remained constant throughout these dramatic developments. We want to support the people of Zimbabwe in building a democratic, stable and prosperous country. The only way for Zimbabwe to achieve a legitimate Government is through free and fair elections held in accordance with the constitution. We stand ready to support a legitimate Government to rebuild their beautiful country, working alongside our international and regional partners, with whom we are already engaging in order to lead the response.

President Emmerson Mnangagwa, who was inaugurated on 24 November, has stated that this marks the beginning of a “new unfolding democracy” in Zimbabwe. He must now demonstrate his sincerity by delivering political and economic reform. In particular, he must hold an election in which all Zimbabweans can participate without fear of intimidation or violence. A transition from one despotic ruler to another would be a tragedy for Zimbabwe and its people.

The process of democratisation and economic recovery will be led by Zimbabweans. The Minister for Africa visited Harare on 23 and 24 November and met with actors from across the political spectrum to discuss the transition to democracy. He made clear to the incoming Administration that the UK stands ready to play a key role in support Zimbabwe’s recovery, but only on the basis of genuine political and economic reforms, including respect for human rights and the rule of law. In this moment of hope for Zimbabwe, the UK will be looking for tangible indications of progress.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): The meeting covered discussions on Burma, Iran, Turkey, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) and human rights.

**Burma**

The Council adopted conclusions on Burma, in the light of the humanitarian and human rights situation in Rakhine state.

**Iran**

EU Foreign Ministers agreed a statement underlining EU commitment to the continued full and effective implementation of the joint comprehensive plan of action (JCPOA), and also expressing concerns related to Iran’s ballistic missiles programme and increasing tensions in the region.

**Turkey**

Over lunch, EU Foreign Ministers discussed Turkey in preparation for the European Council discussions held by EU Heads of State and Government on 19 October. They focused on co-operation with Turkey in the region, including Syria, Iraq and relations with Iran.

**DPRK**

The Council discussed the situation in the Korean peninsula following recent provocative acts by the DPRK. EU Foreign Ministers agreed the need to maintain pressure on the DPRK, including through engagement with regional actors and outreach efforts to strengthen the implementation of UNSC resolutions by all UN member states. The Council adopted additional EU sanctions on the DPRK to complement and reinforce the UN Security Council sanctions.

**Human rights**


EU Foreign Ministers agreed a number of measures without discussion:

- the Council adopted conclusions on an EU strategy on Afghanistan;
- the Council adopted conclusions on Bosnia and Herzegovina;
- the Council approved the EU programme of exercises and exercise-related activities under the common foreign and security policy (CFSP) for the period 2017-21;
- the Council approved the signing and conclusion of a protocol to the partnership and co-operation agreement establishing a partnership between the EU and the Kyrgyz Republic to take account of the accession of the Republic of Croatia to the European Union;
- the Council established and launched a new CSDP mission to support security sector reform in Iraq. The Council also adopted the operation plan and a decision authorising the opening of negotiations to conclude an agreement on the status of the EU advisory mission (EUAM);
- the Council adopted three decisions authorising the opening of negotiations with Albania, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina for agreements on activities carried out by the European Border and Coast Guard Agency in those countries;
- the Council adopted two decisions authorising the opening of negotiations to conclude an agreement by the EU at the joint Council of Caribbean States (Cariforum) and EU member states to be held on 17 November 2017;
- the Council received the high representative’s report on the six-monthly review of Operation Atalanta.

The meeting was chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini. The meeting was held in Luxembourg.
Foreign Affairs Council 13 November

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), and the Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Gavin Williamson), attended the joint session of the Foreign Affairs Council (Foreign and Defence Ministers) on 13 November. The Council was chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini. The meeting was held in Brussels.

EUROPEAN DEFENCE AGENCY

EU Foreign Ministers discussed EU-Africa relations and EU strategic communications. EU Defence Ministers discussed EU-NATO and met as the European Defence Agency steering board. EU Foreign and Defence Ministers also participated in a joint session on security and defence co-operation.

Venezuela

The Council adopted conclusions on Venezuela and agreed targeted sanctions to encourage a peaceful, negotiated solution. These included an embargo on arms and related material that might be used for internal repression, and a legal framework for the possible targeted listing of persons.

EU-Africa relations

Foreign Ministers discussed EU-Africa relations with particular reference to the upcoming fifth African Union-EU summit on 29 and 30 November in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. EU Foreign Ministers welcomed the focus on youth and discussed the common challenges which were expected to be covered at the summit.

EU strategic communications

Foreign Ministers discussed the European External Action Service's current work on strategic communications for the eastern partnership region, the southern neighbourhood and the western Balkans. The Council agreed to further enhance the work, and supported the development of the three taskforces. EU Foreign Ministers underlined the need to counter disinformation where and when needed.

Security and defence co-operation

EU Foreign and Defence Ministers discussed the implementation of the EU global strategy in the area of security and defence. In the margins of the Council, 23 member states signed a notification for the establishment of a permanent structured co-operation (PESCO). The UK did not sign.

EU-NATO

EU Defence Ministers discussed EU-NATO co-operation together with NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg.

European Defence Agency

EU Defence Ministers met as the European Defence Agency (EDA) steering board.

Ministers agreed a number of measures without discussion:

- the Council adopted the legal acts providing for the delisting of the FARC from the EU list of individuals and entities subject to restrictive measures to combat terrorism;
- the Council adopted conclusions on a strategic approach to resilience in the EU's external action;
- the Council appointed Toivo Klaar as EU special representative for the south Caucasus and the crisis in Georgia;
- the Council adopted a regulation reviewing the list of luxury goods subject to an import and export ban on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea;
- the Council adopted a decision to open negotiations on a missions framework participation agreement with Jordan;
- the Council approved the requirements catalogue 2017 which identifies the military capability requirements for the common security and defence policy stemming from the EU level of ambition as agreed by the Council in November 2016;
- the Council endorsed the European Defence Agency report and adopted the guidelines for the work of the European Defence Agency in 2018;
- the Council established the EU position ahead of the ninth meeting of the Stabilisation and Association Council between the EU and Albania which will take place on 15 November in Brussels; and
- the Council established the EU position ahead of the fourth meeting of the Stabilisation and Association Council between the EU and Serbia which will take place on 16 November in Brussels.

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Trade Remedies

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): On 28 November the Government published a call for evidence to identify UK interest in existing EU trade remedy measures. Currently, there are a number of trade remedy measures being applied by the EU, some of which are relevant and significant to UK industry. In preparation for the UK being an independent trading nation, it is important that we provide certainty and continuity to UK businesses, and avoid exposing them to injury from known unfair trade practices.

The call for evidence will obtain the necessary information from UK businesses to enable the Government to assess which measures matter to the UK and therefore can be maintained when the UK begins to operate its own independent trade remedies framework. The Government will take account of the terms of any time-limited implementation period agreed between the UK and the EU.

We recognise that new EU measures may be put in place after the call for evidence closes and before the UK begins to operate its independent trade remedies framework. We will approach those interested parties ahead of the UK operating its independent trade remedies framework to understand whether there is an interest for any future measures to be maintained.

We will assess whether the transition of an existing measure is important to UK industry, and can be retained based on three criteria:

- We have received an application from UK companies which produce products subject to trade remedies measures;
- The application is supported by a sufficient proportion of the UK companies which produce those products;
- The market share of the UK companies which produce those products is above a certain level.

The Government are committed to ensuring continuity to UK industry as the UK prepares to leave the EU. We are also committed to maintaining a fair and transparent approach to the handling of these existing remedies and aligning them as far as possible with our WTO obligations.

[HCWS276]

[HCWS273]
Written Statements

Wednesday 29 November 2017

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Competitiveness Council: Pre-Council Statement

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson): The Competitiveness Council will take place on 30 November and 1 December in Brussels.

Day one—Internal Market and Industry

The Council will aim to agree a general approach on the single digital gateway. The objective of the Single Digital Gateway proposal is to remove barriers to the single market created by lack of easy access to high quality information and Government services online.

The Commission will then present a competitiveness check-up including details of the objectives of the EU industrial strategy. This will lead into a discussion on the European SME action programme, where the Estonian presidency will present a report. The Council will be invited to adopt conclusions on the Commission’s communication on ‘A Renewed EU Industrial Policy Strategy’.

The Council will then discuss a number of AOB points on geo-blocking, the European defence industrial development programme, the digital single market, the Unitary Patent and Unified Patent Court, the European SME action programme, the public procurement package and the traceability system of tobacco products. In these AOB points the Council will be given information by the presidency or by a member state delegation.

The day will end with a presentation by the Bulgarian delegation on details of their upcoming presidency.

Day two—Space and Research

The Council will adopt Council conclusions on the mid-term evaluation of the Copernicus programme. This will be followed by an exchange of views on the way forward for EU space programmes.

The afternoon session will begin with a discussion on Council conclusions “From the Interim Evaluation of Horizon 2020 towards the ninth Framework Programme”. The Council will then debate the mission-oriented approach proposed for the ninth framework programme.

Under AOB, the Commission will provide information on the state of play with open science.

Day two will conclude with information from the Bulgarian delegation on their incoming presidency work programme.

Oil and Gas Authority

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) has today laid before Parliament a direction ensuring that the Oil and Gas Authority consults the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on onshore hydraulic fracturing operations.

Under section 4A of the Petroleum Act 1998 (inserted by section 50 of the Infrastructure Act 2015), operators who wish to conduct associated hydraulic fracturing must apply for a hydraulic fracturing consent from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. Hydraulic fracturing consent was introduced in the Infrastructure Act 2015 as an additional step to the existing regulatory and permitting regime. However, it does not apply to wells drilled before the 2015 Act came into force and these are not captured by the requirement to seek a hydraulic fracturing consent.

Today’s direction closes this loophole and ensures that the same approach for consent is taken for all relevant hydraulic fracturing operations, including where the associated well was drilled prior to the 2015 Act coming into force. For these operations, operators will be expected to meet the same set of standards as required to obtain hydraulic fracturing consent, laid out in the Infrastructure Act 2015. The Government have been clear that shale development must be safe and environmentally sound. The UK has a robust regulatory system which provides a comprehensive regime for exploratory activities and this direction will ensure that all relevant hydraulic fracturing operations are subject to this final step of scrutiny.

Twenty Third Conference of the Parties

The Minister for Climate Change and Industry (Claire Perry): The annual conference of the parties (COP) to the United Nations framework convention on climate change took place in Bonn, Germany, from 6 to 17 November. I led the United Kingdom delegation, accompanied by the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey). As demonstration of the UK’s action at all levels, the First Minister of Scotland Nicola Sturgeon and the Scottish Cabinet Secretary for the Environment Roseanna Cunningham also attended.

The UK’s priorities for COP 23 were to maintain the global political momentum to combat climate change and to promote the UK’s global climate leadership. We demonstrated this commitment to combating climate change through a series of high-profile announcements, most prominently the UK-Canada Powering Past Coal Alliance to phase out unabated coal power, joined at COP 23 by 28 countries and states. We announced over £300 million of programmes to support developing countries to tackle climate change. This included £177 million for sustainable infrastructure in Latin America; £40 million for a climate fund with Germany for reducing emissions in developing countries; £27.5 million to help the world’s largest cities tackle climate change; and £62 million towards two initiatives to support Latin America to halt deforestation. We also announced that we will double our funding for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in 2017 to £230,000—the scientific body whose evidence underpins global climate action.

The context of this COP gave it particular significance, in particular given the recent series of devastating extreme weather events, Fiji as the first small island developing state presidency, and the US’s intention to withdraw from the Paris agreement.
In the negotiations we succeeded in keeping the process on track towards agreeing the rules that will underpin the Paris agreement by the end of 2018, and in creating the conditions for a collective raising of ambition by 2020. Outside negotiations we highlighted our impressive domestic and international action including the recent clean growth strategy, and opportunities for the UK’s low-carbon sector. Since 1990, we have cut emissions by 42% while our economy has grown by two thirds. This means that we have reduced emissions faster than any other G7 nation, while leading the G7 group of countries in growth in national income over this period.

The Green is Great UK pavilion had nearly 50 events showcasing UK low-carbon expertise and opportunities. Highlights included the international launch of the clean growth strategy, the signing of the “Because the Oceans” declaration, and the showcasing of UK business, academic and NGO expertise.

During COP the UK ratified two important climate change agreements: the Doha amendment to the Kyoto protocol (on developed country action before 2020) and the Kigali amendment to the Montreal protocol (on phasing down hydrofluorocarbons), one of the first countries in the world to do so.

The UK, negotiating as part of the EU, secured its main negotiation objectives: progress in the multiple negotiating tracks on the work needed to implement the Paris agreement; and a clear vision for next year’s “Talanoa dialogue”—a collective process which will take stock of current efforts and drive future global ambition.

Other important outcomes from the negotiations included agreement to showcase and accelerate work on pre-2020 action; agreement of a gender action plan and a local communities and indigenous peoples platform to promote greater inclusion in climate action and UN processes; and the launch of an ocean pathway partnership to strengthen the inclusion of oceans in the UN climate process.

Climate change will rightly continue to be at the forefront of international activity over the next year: President Macron will host the One Planet summit in Paris next month; it will feature strongly at the Commonwealth summit in April 2018; it will be prominent in the work of the G7 and G20, hosted by Canada and Argentina respectively; and California will host a major summit for cities and regions in September 2018. Meanwhile the “Talanoa dialogue” process will run through the year culminating in COP 24 in Katowice, Poland and there is further detailed work to be done to conclude the Paris “rulebook” by the end of COP24.

[HCWS289]

TREASURY
Counter-Terrorist Asset Freezing Regime: January-March 2017

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Stephen Barclay): Under the Terrorist Asset-Freezing etc. Act 2010 (TAF A 2010), the Treasury is required to report to Parliament, quarterly, on its operation of the UK’s asset-freezing regime mandated by UN Security Council resolutions 1373 and 1452. This report covers the period from 1 January 2017 to 31 March 2017. This report also covers the UK implementation of the UN’s ISIL (Daesh) and al-Qaeda asset-freezing regime (ISIL-AQ) and the operation of the EU asset-freezing regime in the UK under EU regulation (EC) 2580/2001 which implements UNSCR 1373 against external terrorist threats to the EU.

Under the ISIL-AQ asset-freezing regime, the UN has responsibility for designations and the Treasury, through its Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation (OFSI), has responsibility for licensing and compliance with the regime in the UK under the ISIL (Daesh) and al-Qaeda (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 TAF A 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. Once a designation is made under this regime it will appear in the table available online.

Annexes A and B to this statement provide a breakdown, by name, of all those designated by the UK and the EU in pursuance of UN Security Council resolution 1373.

The table, available as an attachment online, sets out the key asset-freezing activity in the UK during the quarter.

ANNEX A: DESIGNATED PERSONS UNDER TAF A 2010 BY NAME

Individuals
Hamed ABDOLLAHI*
Imad Khalil AL-ALAMI
Abdelkarim Hussein AL-NASSER*
Ibrahim Salih AL-YACOUB*
Mansoor ARBABI*
Usama HAMDAN
Hasan IZZ-AL-DIN*
Mohammed KHALED
Musa Abu MARZOUK
Khalid MISHAAL
Khalid Sheikh MOHAMMED*
Abdul Reza SHAHLAI*
Ali Gholam SHAKURI*
Qasem SOLEIMANI*

Entities
Basque Fatherland and Liberty (ETA)
Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN)*
Hizballah Military Wing, including external security organisation*
Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—General Command (PFLP-GC)*
Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP)*
Sendero Luminoso (SL)*

ANNEX B: PERSONS DESIGNATED BY THE EU UNDER COUNCIL REGULATION (EC) 2580/2001

Persons
Hamed ABDOLLAHI*
Abdelkarim Hussein AL-NASSER*
Ibrahim Salih AL-YACOUB*
**Groups and entities**

Abu Nidal Organisation (ANO)

Al-Aqsa E.V.

Al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigade

Babbar Khalsa

Communist Party of the Philippines, including New People’s Army (NPA), Philippines

Devrimci Halk Kurtuluş Partisi-Cephesi—DHKP/C (Revolutionary People’s Liberation Army/Front/Party)

Ejército de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Army)*

Gama’a al-Islamiyya (a.k.a. Al-Gama’a al-Islamiyya) (Islamic Group—IG)

Hamas, including Hamas-Izz al-Din al-Qassem

Hizballah Military Wing, including external security organisation

Hizbul Mujahideen (HM)

Hofstadgroep

Islami Büyük Doğu Akincilar Cephesi (IBDA-C) (Great Islamic Eastern Warriors Front)

Khalistan Zindabad Force (KZF)

Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) (a.k.a. Kongra-Gel)

Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)

Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ)

Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—General Command (PFLP-GC)*

Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP)*

Sendero Luminoso (SL) (Shining Path)*

Teyrbaizen Azadiya Kurdistan (TAK)

**Annex A:** Designated persons under TAF A 2010 by name

**Individuals**

Hamed ABDOLLAHI*

Imad Khalil AL-ALAMI

Abdelkarim Hussein AL-NASSER*

Ibrahim Salih AL-YACOUB*

Manssor ARBABSIAR*

Usama HAMDAN

Hasan IZZ-AL-DIN*

Mohammed KHALED

Musa Abu MARZOUK

Khalid MISHAAL

Khalid Sheikh MOHAMMED*

Abdul Reza SHAHLAI*

Ali Gholam SHAKURI*

Qasem SOLEIMANI*

**Entities**

Basque Fatherland and Liberty (ETA)

Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN)*

Hizballah Military Wing, including external security organisation*

Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—General Command (PFLP-GC)*

Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP)*

Sendero Luminoso (SL)*
ANNEX B: PERSONS DESIGNATED BY THE EU UNDER COUNCIL REGULATION (EC) 2580/2001

Persons

Hamed ABDOLLAHI*
Abdelkarim Hussein AL-NASSER*
Ibrahim Salih AL-YACOUB*
Manssor ARABSIAR*
Mohammed BOUYERI
Hasan Hassan EL HAJJ
Hasan IZZ-AL-DIN*
Farad MELIAD
Khalid Sheikh MOHAMMED*
Dalokay SANLI
Abdul Reza SHAHLAI*
Ali Gholam SHAKURI*
Qasem SOLEIMANI*

Groups and entities

Abu Nidal Organisation (ANO)
Al-Aqsha E.V.
Al-Aqsha Martyrs’ Brigade
Babbar Khalsa
Communist Party of the Philippines, including New People’s Army (NPA), Philippines
Devrimci Halk Kurtuluş Partisi-Cephesi—DHKP/C (Revolutionary People’s Liberation Army/Front/Party)
Ejército de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Army)*
Gama’a al-Islamiyya (a.k.a. Al-Gama’a al-Islamiyya) (Islamic Group—IГ)
Hamas, including Hamas-Izz al-Din al-Qassam
Hizballah Military Wing, including external security organisation
Hizbul Mujahideen (HM)
Hofstadgroep
Islami Büyük Doğu Akıncılar Cephesi (IBDA-C) (Great Islamic Eastern Warriors Front)
Khalistan Zindabad Force (KZF)
Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) (a.k.a. Kongra-Gel)
Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)
Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ)
Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—General Command (PFLP-GC)*
Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP)*
Sendero Luminoso (SL) (Shining Path)*
Teyrba zen Azadiya Kurdistan (TAK)


*EU listing rests on UK designation under TAFA 2010.

 DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Cyber Security and Data Protection: Update

The Minister for Digital (Matt Hancock): Uber has today estimated that the data breach which occurred in October 2016 has affected approximately 2.7 million user accounts in the UK that were using its service or working for the company in the UK at that time.

Uber have stated that this information included names, email addresses and mobile phone numbers related to accounts globally. Uber have stated they have not seen any indication that trip location history, credit card numbers, bank account numbers or dates of birth were downloaded. Based on current information, Uber have stated that they have not seen evidence that financial details have been compromised.

The Information Commissioner’s Office (ICO) have directed Uber to provide them with technical reports that should help UK authorities, in particular the ICO and National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC), to verify these figures and whether any additional types of personal data have been compromised. The Government expect Uber to co-operate fully and promptly with the ICO and the NCSC.

The ICO and NCSC will continue to work tirelessly with Uber to ensure this information is correct. The Government expect Uber to respond fully to the incident with the urgency it demands and to provide the appropriate support to its customers and drivers in the UK. Uber users should continue to be vigilant and follow the advice from the NCSC, which can be found on their website.

The Government take both the protection of personal data and the right to privacy extremely seriously. It is always the company’s responsibility to identify when UK citizens have been affected as part of a data breach and to take steps to reduce any harm to consumers, and it is welcome Uber has done this.

The Government are strengthening the UK’s data protection regime through a new Data Protection Bill, which will give more powers to the ICO to defend consumer interests and issue higher fines of up to £18 million or 4% of global turnover, in cases of the most serious data breaches.

The ICO, NCSC and other relevant authorities in the UK and overseas will continue to work together to ensure the data protection interests of UK citizens are upheld.

HEALTH

Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 2008: Remedial Order

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): We are today laying a non-urgent remedial order to allow a single person to apply for a parental order, which transfers legal parenthood after a surrogacy arrangement.

Surrogacy has an important role to play in our society, helping to create much-wanted families where that might not otherwise be possible. It enables relatives and friends to provide an altruistic gift to people who are not able to have a child themselves, and can help people to have their own genetically-related children. The UK Government
recognise the value of this in the 21st century where family structures, attitudes and life styles are much more diverse.

Provisions in the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990 allowed, where a child was born under a surrogacy arrangement, for the transfer of legal parenthood from the birth mother to the intended parents by means of a parental order.

These provisions were updated by the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 2008, which introduced new provisions to extend eligibility to same-sex civil partners and all couples in long-term relationships, where the relevant criteria were satisfied. This was further amended in 2013 and 2014 to include same-sex married couples.

The Government will now introduce legislation to reflect an equal approach for a single person and couples in obtaining legal parenthood after a surrogacy arrangement. Following a legal challenge to the 2008 Act in 2016, the family court made a declaration that the provision in the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 2008 which enables couples, but not a single person, to obtain a parental order following surrogacy is incompatible with article 14 of the European convention on human rights. Article 14 prohibits discrimination in the enjoyment of convention rights on the grounds of a person's status, and it was accepted that this could include a single person in this context.

Following consideration of possible legislative options, the Government consider that there are compelling reasons to amend the 2008 Act by order made under the power in section 10 of the Human Rights Act 1998 to take remedial action where there is an incompatibility with the Human Rights Act 1998. The Government also propose to remake the parental order regulations in 2018 to reflect all technical amendments to secondary legislation arising from the remedial order.

The Government welcome the opportunity to lay this remedial order to allow a single person the same rights to gain legal parenthood as couples. The order will allow a six-month period where an existing single parent through surrogacy can retrospectively apply for a parental order.

It will be for the Joint Committee on Human Rights to scrutinise the order, take views from parliamentarians and stakeholders and advise the Government and Parliament on the appropriateness of the order. The Committee will have 60 sitting days to undertake these considerations before the Government must review and respond. The Committee will then have a further 60 sitting days to consider and make recommendations to Parliament, before debates in both Houses.

[HCWS282]

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

International Financial Institution: Contingent Liability

The Secretary of State for International Development (Penny Mordaunt): In 2015, the UK agreed to be a founder contributor of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). The AIIB will support economic growth in Asia and drive up living standards. The UK’s membership will deepen economic ties with Asia and create opportunities for British businesses.

As set out in the summer Budget 2015, HM Treasury made an initial capital instalment of US$122,180,000 and committed to subsequent payments of the same amount by the UK Government over the four years from 2017 to 2020. The UK’s overall capital contribution will total US$3,054,500,000 of which these five payments together will make up 20% of “paid-in” capital contribution requiring a cash transfer. The other 80%, $2,443,600,000, is “callable capital” — the AIIB has the right to call for payment for these shares if there is a crisis affecting the bank’s assets or loans. As the paid-in capital is an investment, in return for which we get an asset of a share of the bank, the Office for Budget Responsibility has forecast this payment as a financial transaction. Financial transactions do not add to public sector net borrowing.

Payment of the third annual contribution of $122,180,000 is in line with the authority provided by this House under the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (Initial Capital Contribution) Order 2015. Parliamentary approval for this will be sought in a supplementary estimate for the Department for International Development.

Furthermore, the payment of the third instalment of the capital contribution incurs with it a contingent liability. In line with the AIIB articles of agreement, the contingent liability rises in line with the amount of callable capital paid. As such, the UK will increase its current contingent liability of $977,440,000 incurred following the previous two capital contributions, by a further $488,720,000 to a cumulative total contingent liability of US$1,466,160,000. A departmental minute to this effect was laid before Parliament on 29 November 2017 to give at least 14 sitting days’ notice of the intent to incur a contingent liability. The notice period will be completed on 20 December 2017.

Although the AIIB has the right to call for payment of this callable capital incurred when the initial capital instalment was paid, no such instance has occurred in any multilateral development bank in the past. If the liability were to be called, provision for any payment would be sought through the normal Supply procedure.

[HCWS283]

TRANSPORT

Rail Update

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): I am today publishing “Connecting people: a strategic vision for rail”, which describes our vision for the railways, and the actions we are taking to make it a reality. We are bringing the organisations that run the tracks and trains closer together to deliver better services for passengers. We are pressing ahead with Network Rail devolution to a series of route based businesses. We are investing in upgrades to the network to deliver faster journey times, more capacity and unlock growth. We are also improving the customer experience, including smart ticketing.

I am making copies of the strategic vision available in the Libraries of both Houses.
I am also today announcing a consultation on the future of the Great Western franchise, and issuing the invitation to tender for the next South Eastern franchise.

These documents are now available on the website of the Department for Transport.

Attachments can be viewed online at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-11-29/HCWS281/.
Written Statements

Thursday 30 November 2017

CABINET OFFICE

Correction

The First Secretary of State and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Damian Green): During Prime Minister’s questions on 29 November 2017, in answer to the question from the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) I should have said that spending on disability is £50 billion.

[HCWS290]

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local Government Improvement: Somerset and Suffolk

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): I am announcing today that having carefully considered all the material and representations I have received, I am “minded to” implement two locally led proposals for merging district councils in Somerset and Suffolk.

The first of these is a proposal Taunton Deane Borough Council and West Somerset District Council submitted to me in March 2017 to merge into a new, single district council. The second is a proposal Forest Heath District Council and St Edmundsbury Borough Council submitted in September 2017 similarly to merge into a new, single district council.

I am satisfied, on the basis of the information currently available to me, that each of these proposals fully meets the criteria that I told the House on 7 November 2017, Official Report, column 48WS, I would use for assessing proposals for merging district councils, namely that:

- the proposal is likely to improve local government in the area concerned;
- the proposal commands local support, in particular that the merger is proposed by all councils which are to be merged and there is evidence of a good deal of local support;
- and that the proposed merged area is a credible geography, consisting of two or more existing local government areas that are adjacent, and which, if established, would not pose an obstacle to locally led proposals for authorities to combine to serve their communities better and would facilitate joint working between local authorities.

Before I take my final decisions on these proposed mergers there will now be a period until 19 January 2018 during which those interested may make further representations to me, including that if a proposal is implemented it is with suggested modifications. The final decisions would also be subject to parliamentary approval.

[HCWS294]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Transport, Telecommunications and Energy Council

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley): The Transport, Telecommunications, and Energy (TTE) Council will take place in Brussels on 4 and 5 December 2017. The UK’s deputy permanent representative to the EU will represent the interests of the UK at the telecommunications session on 4 December. Telecoms

The council will seek to gain a general approach among EU member states on the proposals laying down the renegotiated regulatory framework for the Body of European Regulators for Electronic Communications (BEREC). The UK is proposing to vote in favour, subject to scrutiny, having already submitted a formal request for scrutiny clearance or waiver, ahead of the council vote.

The presidency is expected to provide a progress update on the e-privacy regulation, expected to be used as a means of highlighting the importance of privacy online.

Also tabled is a policy debate on the Commission’s initiative on the free flow of data proposal.

The presidency will provide information relating to the DSM initiative on 5G, with an update on the 5G spectrum road map. Additional agenda items include information from the presidency on European electronic communications code, as well as the Council conclusions on cyber security and the Council’s action plan.

Other

The Council will be receiving information from the Bulgarian delegation, as the incoming presidency in the first half of 2018, to set out its work programme for the next six months.

[HCWS295]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Hague Convention on Child Abduction

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): The Government have decided to opt in to the European Commission’s proposals for Council decisions authorising the acceptance by certain member states of the accession of named countries to the 1980 Hague convention on the civil aspects of international child abduction, in the interests of the EU. The acceptances are as follows:

- Luxembourg and Romania to accept Georgia and South Africa
- Croatia, the Netherlands, Portugal and Romania to accept San Marino
- Romania to accept Chile, Iceland and Bahamas
- Austria and Romania to accept Panama, Uruguay, Colombia and El Salvador

The UK has already accepted all of the named countries, and therefore these Council decisions do not instruct the UK to take any action.

[HCWS296]
All EU member states are party to the 1980 Hague convention, the primary civil law international instrument which provides a mechanism to seek the prompt return of wrongfully removed or retained children to their country of habitual residence.

When a country wishes to accede to the convention, it is necessary for an existing contracting state to accept that country’s accession before the convention can apply between them. It is the European Commission’s view that there is exclusive competence on the EU for all matters relating to the 1980 convention and that therefore member states must be authorised by the EU to accept accessions by third countries and must do so collectively through Council decisions.

Although not anticipated in the proposals, the Government believe that the UK opt-in under the protocol to title V of the treaty on the functioning of the European Union applies and it has therefore asserted its right to choose whether to opt in and has decided that it is in the UK’s best interests to do so.

The Government have taken this decision notwithstanding the fact that they dispute the Commission’s claim to exclusive competence.

The Government believe that the wider significance of these proposals for external competence mean that it is in the UK’s interests to participate fully in these negotiations, including having the ability to vote. These proposals must be agreed by unanimity within the EU Council.

[HCWS292]

Chemical Weapons: Syria

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): I wish to make a statement about the use of chemical weapons in Syria and the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW)—UN joint investigative mechanism.

We condemn the use of chemical weapons by anyone, anywhere. It is of great concern that chemical weapons attacks against civilians in Syria have continued, four years after the Syrian regime used sarin in Ghouta to such horrific effect in 2013.

The UN Security Council has made clear repeatedly, in resolutions 2118 (2013), 2209 (2015), and 2235 (2015), that there would be consequences for those responsible for using chemical weapons in Syria. The Security Council thus sent a clear signal that all chemical weapons attacks in Syria must cease.

On 26 October the joint investigative mechanism (JIM) issued its report on its investigation into the incident in Khan Sheikhoun of 4 April 2017 (available at www.un.org as document reference S/2017/904). When I updated the House in April I said that the Assad regime almost certainly gassed its own people, in breach of international law and the rules of war. Nearly 100 people died and hundreds more were injured in that terrible attack. Six months later the JIM concluded that it was “confident that the Syrian Arab Republic is responsible for the release of sarin” at Khan Sheikhoun. The JIM also concluded that it was “confident that ISIL is responsible for the use of sulfur mustard” at Um Housh on 15 and 16 September 2016. The JIM’s report is the result of a painstaking, independent investigation by UN investigators.

These were not isolated incidents. The JIM had already found that the regime used chlorine as a chemical weapon on at least three separate occasions in 2014 and 2015 and that Daesh used sulphur mustard once in 2015. The OPCW reported on 2 November that sarin was more than likely used on 30 March in Ltamenah, only 15 miles from Khan Sheikhoun. The OPCW continues to investigate further reports of alleged chemical attacks by both Daesh and the Syrian regime. It also continues to investigate “gaps, inconsistencies and inaccuracies” in Syria’s declaration of its chemical weapons programme.

I was appalled to see Russia veto three times the attempts by the UN Security Council to continue the JIM’s investigations. Those votes, bringing Russia’s vetoes on Syria to a total of 11, demonstrated Russia’s overriding determination to protect its allies in the Syrian regime, whatever the crimes committed. Despite the fact that, in 2013, Russia said it had secured Syria’s agreement to destroy all its chemical weapons, Syria has continued to use them. Russia’s response to four confirmed chemical attacks by the Syrian regime and two by Daesh is to shut down further investigation.

The UK has been at the forefront of international efforts to ensure that reports of attacks are properly investigated and those responsible identified. The UK was proud to have supported both the JIM and the OPCW’s fact finding mission, including contributing funding to the OPCW’s Syria trust funds, for destruction, verification and investigative activities. And we responded to the request for assistance from the investigators by sharing information which underpinned the conclusions the UK had reached nationally and which I set out to the House in April.

We will not let Russia’s actions to close down the JIM stop our efforts to uphold international law prohibiting the use of chemical weapons, and to identify and bring to justice those who violate that law. We fully support the OPCW’s ongoing investigations, and other investigations into crimes committed in Syria, such as the UN Human Rights Council’s commission of inquiry and the UN General Assembly’s international impartial and independent mechanism (IIIM). Working with our partners on the UN Security Council and in other fora, we will actively seek to hold those responsible for using chemical weapons and prevent such attacks happening again.

[HCWS291]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Grenfell Tower

The Minister for Immigration (Brandon Lewis): I wish to inform the House that I am today introducing changes to the dedicated immigration policy for residents of Grenfell Tower and Grenfell walk.

First, I am extending the dedicated immigration policy for survivors of the Grenfell Tower tragedy.

The extension will allow survivors who have not yet come forward to do so by 2 January 2018. Providing survivors with an additional opportunity to come forward to regularise their immigration status is consistent with the Government’s objective to ensure all those directly affected receive the support they need.
Second, having reviewed the impact of the policy over the last four months, I have also decided to extend its scope to enable any Grenfell survivor with valid leave in another category to switch into the dedicated leave outside the rules policy by 31 January 2018. Individuals will no longer need to demonstrate that their leave is due to expire in the next 12 months or that they cannot qualify under another immigration route in order to be eligible under the Grenfell Tower immigration policy. They may wish to seek independent legal advice as to whether switching or remaining in their existing immigration route is the best option for them.

Finally, I have carefully considered the issue of access to public funds and I would like to provide reassurance to those who have leave in another category, such as family or work, but who qualified under the Grenfell Tower immigration policy for a change of conditions. I am announcing today that they will continue to have recourse to public funds and permission to work for as long as they qualify for leave to remain in the UK.

I hope this announcement provides further reassurance that the welfare of those directly affected by the fire is the Government’s top priority. Anyone who has not yet come forward can do so before 31 January 2018 by calling our Home Office Grenfell team on 0208 196 4531 and arranging an appointment to speak to a member of our dedicated team in person.

Revised guidance with further details on the Grenfell Tower immigration policy which reflect today’s announcement will be published in due course.

[HWCS297]

Retention of Communications Data

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Dr Phillip Lee): I am pleased to lay and publish the Chief Coroner’s fourth annual report to the Lord Chancellor on the operation of coroner services under section 36 of the Coroners and Justice Act 2009 (“the 2009 Act”). The report covers the period 1 July 2016 to 30 June 2017.

In particular the Chief Coroner’s report sets out:

- The continuing work to promote consistency in the resourcing of and practices in coroner offices across England and Wales;
- The training and guidance that coroners and their officers have received and the engagement with a wide range of stakeholders;
- Recommendations to improve coroner services further.

His Honour Sir Peter Thornton QC retired as Chief Coroner on 30 September 2016 and His Honour Judge Mark Lucraft QC took up post as Chief Coroner on 1 October 2016.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank Sir Peter for his dedication to improving coroner services in England and Wales during his term as first Chief Coroner and the sound foundations he put in place for his successor, as well as for coroners more generally. Under his leadership the number of outstanding cases reduced. His guidance to coroners and training both to coroners and others have enhanced national standards and have brought a level of consistency to the coroner service across England and Wales, making sure that bereaved people are at its heart.

I would also like to record my appreciation for the fine work that Judge Lucraft has done since he took up post last year.

I am grateful too to coroners and their officers and other staff for having supported both Chief Coroners to improve services for bereaved people and for their valued and continuing frontline work.
Copies of the report will be available in the Vote Office and in the Printed Paper Office. The document will also be available online at.gov.uk.

WALES
New Reserved Powers: Wales

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): I have today laid regulations specifying that the new reserved powers model of devolution for Wales will come into force on 1 April 2018. I consulted the First Minister of Wales and the Assembly’s Presiding Officer before making these regulations.

The new model places Welsh devolution on a firm foundation, with greater clarity on the boundary between matters that are reserved to Parliament and those which are devolved to the National Assembly for Wales.

The regulations also commence the further powers being devolved to the Assembly and Welsh Ministers under the 2017 Act, including powers over elections, transport and the environment. Most of these powers also come into force on 1 April.

The Wales Act 2017 delivers a clearer, fairer and stronger devolution settlement for Wales. Some parts of the Act are already in force, including provisions that:

- reaffirm the Government’s commitment to the permanence of the National Assembly for Wales (the Assembly) and the Welsh Government;
- remove the requirement for a referendum before the devolution of income tax to Wales; and
- double (to £1 billion) the amount Welsh Ministers can borrow to fund capital expenditure.

[HCWS293]
Written Statements
Friday 1 December 2017

TREASURY

ECOFIN

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): A formal meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) was held in Brussels on 7 November. European Finance Ministers discussed the following items:

European Free Trade Association (EFTA) dialogue
In their annual meeting, Ministers met with representatives from the EFTA group of countries to exchange views on how best to make economic growth inclusive.

Early Morning Session
The Eurogroup president briefed Ministers on the outcomes of the 6 November meeting of the Eurogroup, and the Commission provided an update on the current economic situation in the EU. Ministers decided that Pilar Jurado Borrego, director-general of Spanish customs, is to be the EU’s single candidate for the position of secretary-general of the World Customs Organisation. Ministers were also debriefed by the Economic and Finance Committee (EFC) chair on the EFC’s discussion of the single supervisory mechanism review.

VAT e-commerce package
Ministers considered the various items which make up the VAT e-commerce legislative package.

Review of the European System of Financial Supervision
The Commission presented its legislative proposals on financial supervision to Ministers. This was followed by an exchange of views.

Current Financial Services Legislative Proposals
The Council presidency provided an update on current legislative proposals in the field of financial services.

Insolvency
The Commission presented its proposals on resolving existing non-performing loans, preventing the build-up of future non-performing loans, and measures to increase the efficiency of the general insolvency framework in member states.

Follow-up to the G20 Meeting of Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors and of the IMF Annual Meetings in Washington
Ministers received information from the presidency and the Commission on the outcomes of the 12-15 October G20 and IMF meetings.

European Court of Auditors’ annual report
The president of the Court of Auditors presented the auditors’ report on the implementation of the budget of the European Union for the 2016 financial year.

Statistical package
The Council discussed the autumn statistical package and reviewed progress achieved, and Ministers exchanged views on the prospects for European co-operation on statistics. Council conclusions were also approved.

HEALTH

Congenital Heart Disease Services

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): We are today making a statement on the decisions taken by NHS England at its board meeting on 30 November 2017 regarding future commissioning arrangements for adults’ and children’s CHD services in England, following its review of and full public consultation on these services.

CHD services are a specialised service currently commissioned by NHS England. There have been concerns about these services, especially children’s congenital heart surgery, which date back to the early 1990s and which have been the subject of a number of reviews.

Heart surgery is becoming ever more complex and technically demanding. Surgeons now operate on babies that may be only hours old and will in the future be able to operate on babies before they are born. This demands a highly skilled and experienced team of doctors and nurses able to operate on sufficient numbers of patients to maintain and improve their skills. It also requires that a wider range of other specialist children’s services are also present on the same hospital site. This determines what medical care is available by the bedside for a child in a critical condition, which is important because many children with CHD have multiple medical needs.

The new congenital heart disease review was established in July 2013, and on 23 July 2015 the NHS England board agreed the standards—almost 200 in total that cover the entire patient pathway. These standards were collaboratively developed over a two-year period by patients and their families and carers, clinicians, commissioners, and other experts. They were the subject of extensive public consultation, and all the views put forward were considered before the standards were finalised.

Patients and their families told NHS England that while it was a good thing to have standards, they only really mattered if they ensured that they were met. Following a self-assessment of providers against these standards, NHS England announced in July 2016 that it was minded to make a number of changes in the way it commissions CHD services. NHS England set out proposals to implement the standards, and asked for views in a full, formal, public consultation that ran between 9 February 2017 and 17 July 2017.

With this review, NHS England has been asking how we can take the good service we have today across the country and turn it into a truly great service for the long term; a service fit for the 21st century. When its proposals are implemented, patients and their families can be confident that they will be able to access the very best CHD services in the world, regardless of where they live.

Having noted the results of the consultation, and in order to support the full implementation of the standards, NHS England agreed a number of recommendations regarding future commissioning arrangements for CHD services in England at its board meeting on 30 November 2017. It also agreed proposals for full implementation of all the standards, and confirmed its support for recommendations regarding better information, funding for formal CHD networks and the development and delivery of a rolling peer review programme that will cover all of the standards at all trusts.
The following recommendations were considered and agreed by the NHS England board at its meeting on 30 November 2017:

- for Liverpool Heart and Chest Hospital NHS Foundation Trust to provide level 1 adult CHD services in the north-west, with Manchester University Hospitals Foundation Trust providing the full range of level 2 adult CHD services as an integral part of a north-west CHD Network;
- to continue to commission level 1 CHD services from University Hospitals of Leicester NHS Trust, conditional on the trust achieving full compliance with the standards in line with its plan to do so and demonstrating sufficient progress within required timescales;
- to note the outline proposal presented by the Royal Brompton and Harefield NHS Foundation Trust for how full compliance against the standards might be achieved; to confirm that NHS England should work with RBH and other potential partners on the full range of options for delivering a solution that could deliver full compliance with the standards and ensure the sustainability of other connected services; and to continue to commission level 1 CHD services from the trust, conditional on the trust demonstrating sufficient progress within required timescales;
- to continue to commission level 1 CHD services from The Newcastle upon Tyne Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust until at least March 2021, with NHS England to consider further the future commissioning of both the trust’s advanced heart failure and transplant services and its level 1 CHD services;
- to cease to commission level 2 CHD services, including cardiology interventions in adults with CHD, from the following trusts: Blackpool Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust, Nottingham University Hospitals NHS Trust, and University Hospital of South Manchester NHS Foundation Trust (note, this trust has now merged with Central Manchester University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust to form Manchester University NHS Foundation Trust, which will be providing level 2 adult CHD services under the recommendations).

This will mean that in future level 1 CHD services in England will be provided by the following hospitals:

- University Hospitals of Leicester NHS Trust (children’s and adult services)—subject to the conditions described by NHS England; and
- University Hospital Southampton NHS Foundation Trust (children’s and adult services).

And that in future level 2 CHD services in England will be provided by the following hospitals:

- Brighton and Sussex University Hospitals NHS Trust (adult service);
- Manchester University NHS Foundation Trust (adult service);
- Norfolk and Norwich University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust (adult service);
- Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust (children’s and adult services);
- Papworth Hospital NHS Foundation Trust (adult service).

The commissioning of CHD services in England is a matter for NHS England. The Government will continue to hold NHS England to account as NHS England takes forward the recommendations of its review. Full details of NHS England’s recommendations, including its implementation proposals, are available on its public website.

[HCWS299]

**HOME DEPARTMENT**

**National Crime Agency: Inspection Report**

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): The National Crime Agency (NCA) was established to lead the fight against serious and organised crime. It has the power to task other law enforcement partners and a capability, with local to international reach, to disrupt the impact of serious and organised crime on the UK.

This is the third HMIC inspection of the NCA. It looked at the support provided by the agency to law enforcement in respect of serious crime investigations. Specifically, it focused on three related NCA teams: Specialist Operations Centre, Crime Operational Support, and the Serious Crime Analysis Section.

This report has been published today. I will place a copy of the report in the Library of the House. I have asked HMICFRS to publish this report on my behalf and it is available online at https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/

The report finds that the three teams in the NCA provide an effective and efficient service but that in order to meet the needs of present day policing there must be a concerted effort to respond to the eight recommendations and four areas for improvement set out in this report. It is for the director general to respond to these recommendations, in line with the requirements of the Crime and Courts Act 2013.
Written Statements

Monday 4 December 2017

ECOFIN: 5 December 2017

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond):
A meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) will be held in Brussels on 5 December. EU Finance Ministers will discuss the following items:

Early morning session

The Eurogroup President will brief Ministers on the outcomes of the 4 December meeting of the Eurogroup, and the Commission will provide an update on the current economic situation in the EU. The Chair of the European Fiscal Board (EFB) will present the EFB’s annual report followed by an exchange of views.

Strengthening of the Banking Union

The Council will be invited to take note of both the presidency progress report on the European Deposit Insurance Scheme and information from the Commission on the state of play of the action plan to tackle non-performing loans in Europe. ECOFIN Council will also hold a policy debate on the banking risk reduction package.

Current financial services legislative proposals

The Council presidency will provide an update on current legislative proposals in the field of financial services.

VAT administrative co-operation

The Commission will provide information on new proposals relating to VAT administrative co-operation measures.

Council conclusions on “The EU list of non-co-operative jurisdictions for tax purposes”

The Council will be invited to adopt Council conclusions which include the finalised EU list of non-co-operative jurisdictions for tax purposes.

Council decisions on the implementation of the stability and growth pact

Ministers will be invited to adopt a Council decision to close the UK’s excessive deficit procedure (EDP) and a decision and recommendation on Romania’s compliance with the EU’s fiscal rules.

European Semester 2018

The Commission will present the annual growth survey 2018, the alert mechanism report 2018 and a recommendation for a Council recommendation on the economic policy of the euro-area. Ministers will provide their initial reactions.

EIB proposal to establish a European Development Bank

Ministers will receive information on an EIB initiative to create a subsidiary dedicated to development.

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Alok Sharma):
Our Housing White Paper is clear that fixing our broken market requires solutions that look to the long-term. It requires action to boost local authority planning capacity to plan strategically and across local authority boundaries; to support local authorities to take a proactive role in planning for high-quality and scale; and to encourage local authority ambition and leadership in the delivery of new communities, not just new housing estates.

As part of our commitment to those goals, today I am:

• inviting bids from local authorities and third sector organisations to a £25 million Planning Delivery Fund to support joint working, quality and innovation;
• allocating £3 million of capacity funding to the 14 garden villages in our programme; and,
• publishing a consultation of regulations which will enable the creation of locally led new town development corporations, as an effective vehicle for the delivery of new garden towns.

The £25 million Planning Delivery Fund, which is now open for bids, was first announced in the Housing White Paper and will support ambitious local authorities in areas of high housing need to plan for new homes and infrastructure.

The Planning Delivery Fund will provide the most ambitious local planning authorities with the skills, capacity or capability they need to deliver high quality housing growth at scale and implement our wider planning reforms. We want to support the type of joint working and strategic planning which has been demonstrated in Oxfordshire. A commitment to bring forward for adoption a joint statutory spatial plan across authorities is part of Oxfordshire’s recently announced housing deal.

In the Housing White Paper, we announced our ambition to increase nationally set planning fees to 20 per cent. Although this will partially address the issue of planning department funds, it does not go far enough to ensure local authorities are equipped with the appropriate resources, particularly in specialist areas such as design. The Government believe that good design is fundamental to creating attractive, safe and healthy places where people genuinely want to live and to ensure development is acceptable to communities.

The Government are initially opening up £11 million of the £25 million Planning Delivery Fund for financial years 2017-18 to 2018-19, to support and encourage:

• more and better joint working, across local authority boundaries, ensuring that there are the skills and capacity where needed to plan strategically for housing growth, and to manage delivery of new homes and infrastructure;
• a step change in design quality of new development, as well as design advice and support to local authorities delivering growth; and,
• innovation in the planning system, to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of processes and enable the delivery of more high quality homes.

Accordingly, bids are invited for awards from three dedicated funding streams: a Joint Working Fund, a Design Quality Fund, and an Innovation Fund. A copy of the prospectus, including the funding criteria and
how to submit a bid have been published (available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/planning-delivery-fund-prospectus).

Across England, we are currently supporting 24 locally-led garden cities, towns and villages to be exemplars of high quality, good design and best practice. Together they have the potential for approximately 220,000 homes.

Our support has helped foster ambition and innovation and to accelerate the pace of delivery, with over 10,000 new homes now started. We have provided £16 million of capacity funding to date, including an additional £2.5 million to the garden towns in our programme in October. We are now allocating a further £3 million to the 14 garden villages in our programme to fund dedicated staff, master-planning and other studies and assessments that are key to successful, high quality delivery.

The Budget announced that we would support the delivery of another five locally led new garden towns, bringing together public and private capital and using appropriate delivery vehicles such as development corporations. We intend to publish in the spring a prospectus inviting expressions of interest in ambitious, locally supported, proposals for high quality new garden communities at scale. We will continue to explore with local authorities opportunities for planning freedoms where these will enable additional housing growth in our garden cities, towns and villages or elsewhere. We will not be limited to supporting just five new garden communities, but will look to support as many as we can, around the country.

In line with our locally led approach, we do not wish to prescribe any particular delivery model, but to facilitate local authority leadership and ambition.

Our Housing White Paper committed to legislating to enable the creation of new town development corporations, overseen by the local authority or authorities covering the area proposed for the new garden community, rather than by the Secretary of State. As bodies with statutory objectives focused on the development of the new town and with significant independence, we consider that new town development corporations are well placed to manage complex co-ordination challenges across local authority boundaries and create long-term planning and investment confidence, where local authorities consider these are the right delivery vehicle.

Section 16 of the Neighbourhood Planning Act 2017 enables the Secretary of State, through an affirmative resolution statutory instrument, to appoint one or more local authorities to oversee the development of a new town by a new town development corporation. It also enables the Secretary of State to make regulations about how that oversight is to take place.

We are now consulting on a draft of those regulations. Our focus is on ensuring that we maximise the transfer of oversight functions from the Secretary of State to the local authority or authorities and the independence of the development corporation, and support quality and long-term stewardship within the garden community.

Copies of the consultation document have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses and is available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-new-towns-act-1981-local-authority-oversight-regulations

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Law and Order Trust Fund Afghanistan

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): On 28 November 2017 the Foreign and Commonwealth Office fulfilled the pledge made by the former Prime Minister at the NATO Chicago summit in 2012 to commit £70 million for each of the calendar years 2015 to 2017 towards Afghan National Defence and Security Force (ANDSF) sustainment. At the NATO summit in
Warsaw in 2016, the UK committed a further £210 million to sustain its commitment of £70 million per year from 2018 until 2020.

The UK’s 2017 contribution, funded from the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF), has been channelled through both the United Nations Development Programme’s Law and Order Trust Fund Afghanistan (LOTFA) and the NATO-run Afghan National Army Trust Fund (ANATF). The contributions will support payroll management, Afghan National Police salaries, Ministry of Interior and Afghan National Police development, and the provision of additional medical facilities for ANDSF personnel.

The development of a capable, accountable and responsible Ministry of Interior and Afghan National Police service, committed to delivering rule of law, is essential to long-term stability and security in Afghanistan. The Afghan National Police play a fundamental role in providing security, rule of law and public order, as well as helping to build trust in the legitimacy of the state.

Due to the challenging security environment, international support for Afghan policing continues to be required.

The UK remains committed to supporting the development of security institutions in Afghanistan, including the Afghan National Police and Ministry of Interior.

**Presidential Elections: Somaliland**

The Minister for Africa (Rory Stewart): On 13 November, people across Somaliland took part in elections to choose a new President. The UK played an active role as part of a group of international donors in supporting the Somaliland National Election Commission in planning, preparing and delivering these elections. On 16 November, the international election observation mission stated in its initial findings that it had not witnessed irregularities on a scale which would undermine the integrity of the result.

The UK joined international partners in expressing our deepest regrets for the loss of life caused by violent protests in some locations in the days which followed the voting.

On 21 November, the National Election Commission announced that Mr Musa Bihi Abdi had been chosen by the people of Somaliland as their next President. The UK Ambassador in Somalia has extended the UK’s warm congratulations to Mr Musa Bihi Abdi on his election and has commended the commitment and responsibility of opposition candidates, Somaliland’s people, and its institutions to the electoral process and strengthening democracy.

The UK remains committed to helping people from across the Somali region to reach their fullest potential. We now look forward to deepening our partnership with Somaliland as we support Mr Bihi in fulfilling his aspiration to govern for the benefit of all Somalilanders.

**Children and Young People’s Mental Health: Update**

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): Together with my right hon Friend the Secretary of State for Education, I have today laid before Parliament “Transforming Children and Young People’s Mental Health Provision: a Green Paper” (CM 9523). The Green Paper forms part of the Government’s work to transform mental health support, ending what the Prime Minister has referred to as the “burning injustice” of inequality which those with mental health problems experience.

This Government have invested more than ever before in mental health services, and legislated for “parity of esteem”, to ensure that mental health is treated equally with physical health. Schools and colleges are already doing a great deal to support the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people. Most offer training to staff and many promote mental health and wellbeing through skills development sessions and taught sessions about particular mental health issues. Around half have a mental health lead.

However, there is more we need to do to create world-class support for children and young people’s mental health. Half of all mental health conditions begin before the age of 14. The Green Paper therefore focuses on earlier intervention and prevention before issues escalate, particularly in and around schools and colleges.

We are announcing plans to fund new collaboratively delivered mental health support teams. They will be made up of additional trained staff, supervised by NHS specialists, to provide support in or near schools and colleges for children and young people with emerging and more moderate needs. We will test how teams can work with other professionals and support vulnerable children and young people. We also want to continue to improve access to specialist services, and will pilot a four-week waiting time standard for accessing children’s mental health services.

We will also build on what schools already do—rolling out our “schools—children and young people’s mental health services link pilot” nationally. We will provide significant funding to incentivise schools and colleges to train designated senior leads for mental health to work with the new teams and implement whole-school approaches to mental health. The Green Paper also sets out how whole-school approaches will be supported by other developments that are underway, including our engagement process on relationships education, relationships and sex education and personal, social, health and economic education.

The Green Paper also contains a number of other proposals to improve support for young people’s mental health, including work to support the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport’s work on keeping young people safe online, convening a new partnership to look at support for the mental health of 16 to 25-year-olds, and commissioning further research in a number of areas to build our understanding of the evidence.

The Green Paper has been developed with the input of a large range of individuals and organisations. We also commissioned an independent evidence review, conducted by University College London and the National Collaborating Centre for Mental Health, and have based our proposals on the evidence. We also benefited from the evidence submitted to the Health and Education Committees during their inquiry earlier this year into the role of education in children’s mental health. We are grateful to all who have helped shape our proposals.
The proposals as set out in the Green Paper would cost £215 million over the next three years towards the creation of mental health support teams, piloting a four-week waiting time standard and rolling out mental health first aid training to primary schools. Funding will be made available to take forward the final proposals following consultation. We will confirm the amounts to be provided to schools and colleges for training leads following consultation and development of training packages. However we will cover the costs of a significant training programme and provide up to £15 million to 20 million each year from 2019 to cover costs until all schools and colleges have had the chance to train a lead.


[HCWS306]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Foreign Affairs Council (Trade): 10 - 13 December 2017

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): The EU Foreign Affairs Council (Trade) will meet in Buenos Aires during the 11th ministerial conference of the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

The Council will meet on the 10 December before the formal opening of the ministerial conference. The Minister of State for Trade Policy will represent the UK.

We expect the Council to meet again during the ministerial conference, at least once, possibly more, but the date of subsequent meetings of Council has not yet been set.

The only substantive item on the agenda for the Council in Buenos Aires is the 11th ministerial conference of the WTO.

The Buenos Aires ministerial will be the first WTO ministerial conference to be held in Argentina. WTO members will discuss a range of important trade issues, including fisheries subsidies, digital trade, agricultural domestic support and public stockholding, domestic regulation in services, investment facilitation and transparency of regulatory measures for the benefit of SMEs.

[HCWS302]

TRANSPORT

EU Transport Council

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): I will attend the only formal Transport Council under the Estonian presidency (the presidency) taking place in Brussels on Tuesday 5 December.

The first item on the agenda will be a progress report on phase one of the Mobility Package, focusing on proposals designed to improve the clarity and enforcement of the EU road transport market (the ‘market pillar’), and proposals on the application of social legislation in road transport (the ‘social pillar’).

Following this, the presidency has proposed a policy debate on the ‘charging pillar’ of the package. The proposals to amend the existing directives on HGV road tolls and user charges (‘Eurovignette’) and the interoperability of electronic road toll systems (‘EETS’) set out rules for charging vehicles using the road (but do not mandate such charging) and promote better functioning of charging across national barriers.

Next, there will be a progress report on the proposed amendment to the regulation on safeguarding competition in air-transport. The proposal aims to tackle discriminatory practices and address perceived deficiencies in the existing legislation by allowing complaints to be made to the European Commission by a wider range of interested parties who suspect, or have evidence that, one or more EU carriers are being harmed by the unfair practices of a third country.

The Council will adopt conclusions on the progress on Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) and Connecting Europe Facility (CEF). The conclusions do not place any binding requirements on member states. They recognise the value that the TEN-T Policy and CEF (the associated funding programme) bring to EU transport infrastructure and look to strengthen transport investment in the next EU budgeting period. The UK can support these conclusions.

Conclusions will also be adopted on the digitalisation of transport. ‘Digital Europe’ has been a priority for the Estonian presidency and the conclusions highlight the potential and challenges for the digitalisation of transport and, among other things, call on the Commission to develop a comprehensive and multimodal digitalisation strategy for the transport sector during the first quarter of 2019. The UK can support their adoption.

Next, the Council will adopt conclusions on mid-term evaluation of the Galileo, EGNOS and European GNSS agency. We welcome these conclusions and, in particular, the need for new recommendations about the future evolution of the programme to be proportionate and costed before they are brought forward for decision.

Under Any Other Business, the Commission will first present phase two of the Mobility Package, which focuses on clean mobility and includes proposals on promotion of clean and energy-efficient vehicles, combined transport of goods, and access to the market for coach and bus services. The presidency will provide information on the state of play on the proposed rail passenger rights regulation. The delegations from Germany, the Commission, Poland, France and Finland will, respectively, provide information on automated cars, implementation of the aviation strategy, world maritime days, IMO greenhouse gas emission reduction strategy, and summertime arrangements. The Commission will also provide information on military mobility, and finally, the Bulgarian delegation will present the transport work programme of their forthcoming presidency of the Council of the European Union.

[HCWS303]
Written Statements

Tuesday 5 December 2017

TREASURY

Double Taxation Convention: UK and Swiss Federal Council

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): A protocol to the 1977 Double Taxation Convention with Switzerland was signed on 30 November 2017. The text of the protocol has been deposited in the Libraries of both Houses and has been made available on HM Revenue and Customs’ pages of the www.gov.uk website. The text will be scheduled to a draft Order in Council and laid before the House of Commons in due course.

[HCWS313]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Heritage Statement

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (John Glen): I am today publishing a Heritage statement, setting out the direction and priorities for the heritage sector in the coming years.

The statement builds on the commitments we made in last year’s Culture White Paper. It links the heritage agenda to our wider agendas and strategies for industry, for regeneration and place-making, for skills, for the environment, and for an internationalist, outward-looking Britain. It applies to England only, except where it relates to international issues and UK-wide policies and programmes.

The statement is structured around four key themes: places, people, international, and sustainability and resilience. It focuses on areas where the Government can help to support and develop the heritage sector and add value to the work of heritage organisations and the many thousands of specialists, professionals and volunteers who care for and manage our heritage.


[HCWS311]

WALES

Macur Review Report

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): On 17 March 2016 my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb), announced the publication of the report of Lady Justice Macur’s Independent Review of the Tribunal of Inquiry into the abuse of children in care in the former county council areas of Gwynedd and Clwyd in North Wales since 1974.

Among other reasons, the report was redacted to avoid prejudicing ongoing and upcoming criminal prosecutions and trials. Most of the redactions in this category concerned the former North Wales Police superintendent, Gordon Anglesea. Following his criminal trial at Mold Crown Court, on 4 October Gordon Anglesea was sentenced at Mold Crown Court to 12 years’ custody for an indecent assault against one boy and three indecent assaults against another boy. On 15 December 2016 Gordon Anglesea died in HMP Rye Hill.

In light of Gordon Anglesea’s death there is no reason for his name to continue to be redacted, except where there is any risk that victims, witness or other individuals might be identified. I have today therefore laid a revised version of the Macur Review Report with references to Gordon Anglesea reinstated except where an ongoing risk has been identified. The other redactions in the report remain.

[HCWS312]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): The Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council will take place on 7 December 2017 in Brussels. As Minister of State for Employment, I will represent the UK.

The Council will be invited to agree a partial general approach on the revision of regulations on co-ordination of social security systems—Long-Term Care and Family Benefits (883/04 and 987/09).

The Council will be invited to agree a general approach on the European Accessibility Act.

The Council will receive a progress report on the draft directive on equal treatment (Art. 19) and the draft directive on work-life balance.

The Council will be invited to give political agreement to the directive on Maritime Labour Convention (implementing a Social Partner agreement).

As part of the semester process the European Commission will present the annual growth survey 2018, the draft joint employment report, the alert mechanism report and the draft recommendation on the economic policy of the euro area. They will also seek the views and approval of member states on the employment and social aspects of the recommendation on the euro area.

The Council will be invited to adopt Council conclusions on the following three topics: the future of work: making it e-easy; enhancing community-based support and care for independent living; and on enhanced measures to reduce horizontal gender segregation in education and employment.

Under any other business, the Commission will present information on the EU action plan 2017-2019 on tackling the gender pay gap and on concluding the year of focused actions to eliminate gender-based violence.

The Swedish delegation and the Commission will present information on the Social summit (Gothenburg, 17 November 2017) and the Bulgarian delegation will present the work programme of its incoming presidency.
Written Statements

Wednesday 6 December 2017

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY
EU Insolvency Regulation

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): The UK has opted in to the proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council updating the lists of insolvency proceedings and insololvency office-holders in annexes A and B to regulation (EU) 2015/848 on insolvency proceedings. The UK had previously opted in to the underlying regulation on insolvency proceedings in 2015. Amendments to the annexes of the regulation trigger a new opt-in decision.

The annexes list the different insolvency procedures and insololvency office-holders in each member state governed by the regulation. Amendments are made from time to time to reflect changes to member states’ domestic insolvency laws. The current proposal relates to new Belgian, Bulgarian, Croatian, Latvian and Portuguese insolvency procedures and the amendments are considered necessary to ensure that the lists of member states’ domestic insolvency laws are kept up to date. My officials have reviewed the new procedures and agree with the European Commission’s assessment that they properly fall within the scope of insolvency proceedings governed by the regulation.

[HCWS315]

EDUCATION
Government Asset Sale


The sale included loans issued by English local authorities under the previous (pre-2012) system, specifically those that entered repayment between 2002 and 2006.

Throughout the process, Government’s decision on whether to proceed remained subject to market conditions and a final value for money assessment. I can update Parliament that the transaction achieved a value of £1.7 billion, exceeding the HMT Green Book valuation.

Ministers will shortly be laying before Parliament a report on the sale in accordance with section 4 of the Sale of Student Loans Act 2008. This will provide more detail on the sale arrangements and the extent to which they give value according to HM Treasury Green Book rules.

In advance of that, I would like to reiterate the points I have made previously about the impact of the sale on borrowers and on Government policy.

The position of all borrowers, including those whose loans have been sold, will not change as a result of the sale. The sale does not and cannot in any way alter the mechanisms and terms of repayment: sold loans will continue to be serviced by Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs (HMRC) and the Student Loans Company (SLC) on the same basis as equivalent unsold loans. Purchasers have no right to change any of the current loan arrangements or to contact borrowers directly. Those whose loans have been sold will be notified in writing by the Student Loans Company within three months, for information only. No action will be required. Government have no plans to change, or to consider changing, the terms of pre-2012 loans.

[HCWS317]

Higher Education: Resolution (13 September)

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson): On 13 September 2017, the House agreed the motion that the Higher Education (Higher Amount) (England) Regulations 2016 (S.I. 2016, No. 1206) and the Higher Education (Basic Amount) (England) Regulations 2016 (S.I. 2016, No. 1205), both dated 13 December 2016, copies of which were laid before this House on 15 December 2016, in the last Session of Parliament, be revoked. These regulations cover maximum fee caps for the current academic year, 2017-18.

The Government listened carefully to the views expressed in the House on 13 September 2017, and to those expressed by young people and their parents. I therefore made a written statement to the House on 9 October 2017 setting out changes to higher education student finance which will benefit students further in 2018.

In that statement, I confirmed that the Government had decided to maintain maximum tuition fees at their current level for the 2018-19 academic year. This means that the maximum level of tuition fees for a full-time course will remain at £9,250 for the next academic year (2018-19). This is around £300 less than it would have been had the maximum fee been uprated with inflation.

I also confirmed changes to the earnings threshold above which borrowers are required to make contributions to the costs of their education. From April 2018, the repayment threshold for loan repayments will increase from its current level of £21,000 to £25,000 from the 2018-19 financial year. Thereafter the threshold will be adjusted annually in line with average earnings. These changes apply to those who have taken out, or will take out, loans for full-time and part-time undergraduate courses in the post-2012 system. They also apply to those who have taken out, or will take out, an advanced learner loan for a further education course.

Increasing thresholds will put more money in the pockets of borrowers by lowering their monthly repayments with the greatest overall lifetime benefit for those on middle incomes. Borrowers earning less than the repayment threshold (currently £21,000 a year, rising to £25,000 for 2018-19) will continue to be exempt from repayments.

Following the written ministerial statement to the House on 9 October, I can now make a further announcement on student finance arrangements for higher education students undertaking a course of study in the 2018-19 academic year beginning in August 2018.

Maximum grants and loans for living and other costs will be increased by forecast inflation (3.2%) in 2018-19. And for the first time, students starting part-time degree level courses from 1 August 2018 onwards will qualify for loans for living costs.
Further details of the student support package for 2018-19 are set out in the document available as an online attachment.

I expect to lay regulations implementing changes to student finance for undergraduates and postgraduates for 2018-19 early in 2018. These regulations will be subject to parliamentary scrutiny. The Department of Health will be making a separate announcement on changes to student finance for postgraduate healthcare students and dental hygiene and dental therapy students in 2018-19.

These announcements build on the Government’s existing reforms to higher education, which have delivered a 25% increase in university funding per student per degree since 2012. University funding per student is today at the highest level it has ever been in the last 30 years.

We have world-class universities accessed by a record number of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and a progressive funding system which ensures that costs continue to be split fairly between graduates and the taxpayer. The entry rate for disadvantaged 18-year-olds is already at a record high this year, and significantly higher than at the end of the 2016 cycle. People recognise that degrees from our universities provide a route to rewarding and well-paid jobs, and that is why more people are deciding to go to university than ever before.

We will build on those strengths through our planned reforms, which seek to improve the quality of teaching and incentivise universities to focus on graduate outcomes through the teaching excellence and student outcomes framework.

We will be consulting shortly on widening provision of accelerated degrees to enable students to study more intensively, obtain degrees at lower cost, and secure a quicker entry or return to the workplace.

And the Government are committed to conducting a major review of funding across tertiary education to ensure a joined-up system that works for everyone. As current and significant reforms move into implementation, this review will look at how we can ensure that our post-18 education system is accessible to all; and is supported by a funding system that provides value for money and works for both students and taxpayers, incentivises choice and competition across the sector, and encourages the development of the skills that we need as a country.

Attachments can be viewed online at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-12-06/HCWS318/.

[HCWS318]

HEALTH

Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): My hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Lord O’Shaughnessy) has made the following statement:

The Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council will meet on 8 December in Brussels.

For the health part of the meeting there will be three main agenda items on the draft Council conclusions on health in digital society; the draft Council conclusions on the cross-border aspects in alcohol policy; and pharmaceutical policy in the EU—which will cover the following:

Report on the state of paediatric medicines in the EU—10 years of the EU paediatric regulation—information by the Commission.
Issues related to European patients access to treatment—information from the Romanian delegation.
Lack of drug availability in Greece—information from the Greek delegation.

Under any other business, there will also be reports on:
Valproate and teratogenic medicinal products—information from the Belgian delegation.
State of health in the EU—information from the Commission, OECD, and the European observatory.
Annual growth survey 2018—information from the Commission.
Steering group on health promotion, disease prevention and management of non-communicable disease—information from the Commission.
Outcome of the high-level meeting “AMR: One Health Action Plan and evidence-based policy making” (Brussels, 23 November 2017)—information from the presidency.
Work programme of the incoming presidency—information from the Bulgarian delegation.

[NHS Pay: Resolution (13 September)]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): We know pay restraint has been challenging for staff but it has helped the NHS to recruit an additional 32,300 professionally qualified clinical staff since 2010.

Increasing pressures on the NHS due to, among other things, an ageing population and changing public expectations continue to create increased demand and activity and this means that there have been shortages of some groups. We have been working hard to tackle this.

Since 2010 there are 10,100 more nurses on our wards. There are currently over 52,000 nurses in training. In addition, since September 2014 more than 2,400 nurses have completed the return to practice scheme.

This year there were nearly two applicants for every available nurse training place. On 4 December UCAS published their end-of-cycle data which shows 22,575 applicants with confirmed places to study pre-registration nursing and midwifery courses. There were more 18 to 20-year-olds from England accepted to nursing and midwifery in England from August 2017. These figures show there still is strong demand for nursing and midwifery courses. There were more 18 to 20-year-olds from England accepted to nursing courses than ever before from August 2017.

We have already confirmed that the across-the-board 1% public sector pay policy will no longer apply to pay awards for 2018-19. This is due to a recognition that in some parts of the public sector flexibility to go above the 1% may be required to ensure continued delivery of world-class public services.

At the budget we announced that, in order to protect frontline services in the NHS, we are committing to fund pay awards as part of a pay deal for NHS staff on the agenda for change contract, including nurses, midwives and paramedics.

We will make final decisions on funding at the appropriate time after listening to the pay review bodies who will, as is usual practice, consider written and oral evidence from a range of stakeholders, not just from the Government.
They will look at issues such as recruitment, retention and affordability, and will then come back with a recommendation. We expect their reports in May next year.

Public sector pay packages will continue to recognise workers’ vital contributions, while also being affordable and fair to taxpayers as a whole.

[HCWS319]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Justice and Home Affairs Council

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): The EU Justice and Home Affairs Council of Ministers will meet on 7 and 8 December in Brussels. I will represent the UK for Interior day. The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, the right hon. David Lidington MP will represent the UK for Justice day.

Interior day, 7 December, will begin with an exchange of views on the interim report and recommendations of the High-level Expert Group on Radicalisation (HLEG-R), which was set up to consider how best to address radicalisation in EU member states. The non-EU Counter-Terrorism Group (CTG) will present to Council their assessment of the terrorist threat in the EU, and update on recent capability developments, including on work needed to improve co-operation with the law enforcement community. I will intervene positively in support of HLEG-R and CTG activities.

This will be followed by a discussion on co-operation between Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) operations and EU JHA agencies. This work aims to join up the activity of JHA agencies more effectively with EU security and defence missions in third countries. The Commission will identify lessons that can be learnt from existing co-operation, such as Operation Sophia (tackling migrant traffickers in the central Mediterranean) for other CSDP operations and JHA agencies. The UK supports improving co-operation in this area and I will endorse this workstream.

The Commission will update on the state of play on implementation of the directive on the use of passenger name record (PNR) data. The UK has the most developed capability for processing PNR data in Europe and will continue to offer advice and support to member states in the development of their own capabilities.

There will be a progress report on the technical discussions on improving interoperability of EU information systems, following the recommendations made by a high-level expert group in June. The Commission is also expected to set out the principles behind their forthcoming legislative proposal on this issue. The UK supports efforts to improve interoperability of EU information systems, but we will need to scrutinise the proposal when it is published.

This will be followed by a progress report from the presidency on negotiations on the reform of the common European asylum system. The UK has not opted in to the majority of these measures, and I am unlikely to intervene on this item.

The presidency will then seek a general approach on the proposed EU-LISA regulation. The Government have opted in to the draft regulation and have no concerns with the text, but as the proposals have not cleared parliamentary scrutiny, I will abstain on the vote in Council.

At a working lunch Ministers will debate the strengthening of the Schengen area which is likely to focus on improving Schengen border management through a variety of co-ordinated actions, including the proposed Schengen internal borders legislative package which was published in September. The UK does not participate in the Schengen border free zone and I will not intervene in this discussion.

In the afternoon, the presidency will provide an update on discussions exploring the implications of the Court of Justice of the European Union judgment in the TELE2 / Watson case from December 2016, and the circumstances in which member states can require the retention of communications data. The UK continues to play a leading role in these discussions. I will update the Council on the proposed UK approach reflecting the principles set out in our consultation, launched on 30 November, on new safeguards for the use of communications data.

In addition, there will be a policy debate on best practice in tackling encrypted data. The UK is supportive of work in this area and is keen to ensure that law enforcement can access the data they need to protect the public, but that any proposals do not weaken internet security or jeopardise existing good co-operation with service providers.

Finally the Council will receive updates on the third meeting of the central Mediterranean contact group which took place in Bern on 13 November 2017; the outcomes of the EU internet forum meeting on 6 December; and the presidency’s mid-term review of the JHA strategic guidelines. The incoming Bulgarian presidency will also give a presentation on their work programme and priorities.

Justice day, 8 December, will begin with the presidency seeking a general approach on the European criminal records information system (ECRIS) directive and the regulation regarding exchange of information on third country nationals (ECRIS-TCN). There appears to be broad agreement on the text prior to the JHA Council, which the Government can support, although as the proposals have not cleared parliamentary scrutiny, we will abstain on any vote in Council.

A second general approach will be sought on Justice day for the proposed regulation on mutual recognition of freezing and confiscation orders. While there is not yet agreement among member states on whether this should take the form of a regulation or a directive, we expect the presidency to seek a qualified majority on the basis of a regulation. The UK remains neutral on this question. This proposal has not yet cleared parliamentary scrutiny and so we will abstain should there be a vote.

There will be an update from the presidency to Ministers on progress on the EU on accession to the European convention human rights, following ECJ opinion 2/13 in December 2014. Although progress has been slow, the responsible working group in the Council has now held a first discussion on all but one of the issues raised by the Court’s opinion. The outstanding issue is the question of whether common foreign and security policy
(CFSP) would fall within the jurisdiction of the ECtHR after accession; a paper on this is expected from the Commission. The presidency is expected to ask the Commission for an update on the timing of this paper, but no questions will be posed of Ministers.

The lunchtime discussion will be on preparations for the next e-justice strategy and action plan.

Justice day will resume with a policy debate on the recast Brussels IIa regulation. The presidency will be asking Ministers to confirm that the recast Brussels IIa regulation should abolish for all types of judgments the procedure by which judgments from one country are recognised for enforcement in another (known as exequatur) and that the method by which this is done should be considered further by the negotiations working group. The UK continues to support the abolition of exequatur subject to the inclusion of sufficient safeguards.

Finally, there will be a policy debate on the draft proposals for a directive on preventive restructuring, second chance and insolvency proceedings. The presidency has set out conclusions for agreement by Ministers on the future direction of work. The UK is generally supportive of these conclusions.
### Written Statements

**Thursday 7 December 2017**

**BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY**

**Energy Infrastructure**

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): I would like to make the following statement:

**Nuclear power generation**

New nuclear power stations have an important role to play. As confirmed in the Industrial Strategy, nuclear is a vital part of our energy mix, providing low carbon power now and into the future. The Government’s framework to bring forward new nuclear power stations was established in the 2008 White Paper on Nuclear Power, as was the principle the Government should take active steps to help facilitate the construction of new nuclear.

The overarching National Policy Statement (“NPS”) for Energy (“EN-1”) published in July 2011 made clear that nuclear power is a low-carbon, proven technology which can play an important role increasing the resilience and diversity of the UK’s energy system. The assessment of the need for new electricity generation carried out to support EN-1 remains valuable and continues to be relevant.

My Department’s annual updated energy and emissions projections state that by 2035 overall demand for electricity is expected to have increased. Therefore, with a number of the existing coal and nuclear fleet due to close by 2030, new nuclear power generation remains key to meeting our 2050 obligations. This is in line with the 2017 Clean Growth Strategy. The Government have noted previously that there are technical and commercial barriers to deploying other technologies to produce the same annual generation as that of nuclear power. The need for the UK to continue to transition to a low-carbon electricity market is underlined by the 2015 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (“UNFCCC”) Paris Agreement. The Government believe that it is important that there is a strong pipeline of new nuclear power to contribute to the UK’s future energy system.

**Government consultation**

The Government have today published a consultation on the process and criteria for designating potentially suitable sites in a National Policy Statement for nuclear power between 2026 and 2035. This begins the process towards designating a new National Policy Statement (“the new NPS”) applicable to nuclear plants expected to be deployed after 2025 and capable of deployment by the end of 2035 and with over 1GW of single-reactor electricity generating capacity.

**Nuclear National Policy Statements**

**Applicability of EN-6**

The Government consider that the current nuclear NPS, EN-6, only “has effect” for the purposes of section 104 of the Planning Act 2008 (“the Act”) for development which forms parts of a project able to demonstrate expected deployment by the end of 2025. Applications for a Development Consent Order under the Act will be considered in the first instance by an examining authority appointed by the Secretary of State to consider any specific project proposals. For the purpose of the applicability of EN-6, Government considers “deployment” to mean the point when a generating station first begins to feed the electricity it generates into the national grid, noting this will likely be at a point before full commercial operation.

For projects yet to apply for development consent and due to deploy beyond 2025, the Government continues to give its strong in principle support to project proposals at those sites currently listed in EN-6. Even if EN-6 is considered not to have effect under section 104 of the Act for such a project, section 105 of the Act would apply to the decision on whether or not to grant development consent for the project.

The Government are confident that both EN-1 and EN-6 incorporate information, assessments and statements which will continue to be important and relevant for projects which will deploy after 2025, including statements concerning the need for nuclear power—as well as environmental and other assessments that continue to be relevant for those projects. As such, in deciding whether or not to grant development consent to such a project, the Secretary of State would be required, under section 105(2)(c) of the Act, to have regard to the content of EN-1 and EN-6, unless they have been suspended or revoked. In respect of matters where there is no relevant change of circumstances it is likely that significant weight would be given to the policy in EN-1 and EN-6.

**Applicability of the new NPS**

The new NPS, once designated, will “have effect” for the purposes of section 104 of the Act for development which forms parts of a project able to demonstrate expected deployment after 2025 and before the end of 2035.

The Government also consider that a published new NPS in draft form would be considered as relevant to a decision on whether or not to grant development consent under section 105 of the Act.

[HCWS321]

**Energy Policy**

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): Today we have announced our next steps for the development of advanced nuclear technologies in the UK. The advanced nuclear sector has the potential to play an important part in the UK’s industrial strategy building on our existing economic strengths and competitive advantages in nuclear while shaping new advanced nuclear markets and contributing to tackling the clean growth grand challenge. To help deliver this, the Government will provide up to £56 million for advanced nuclear technologies over the next three years.

The Government launched the first phase of the small modular reactor (SMR) competition in March 2016 as an evidence-gathering phase with the goal of
The Government will also continue to work closely with the advanced nuclear industry stakeholders to foster the market conditions needed to enable developers to bring privately financed small and novel reactors to market. A crucial element of this is demonstrating commercial viability—in particular, the ability of new designs and delivery mechanisms to attract investment and generate cost-competitive electricity.

Therefore the Government are setting up an expert finance group to advise how small and advanced reactor projects could raise investment in the UK. By bringing together nuclear and financial sector expertise we anticipate that this group will help demonstrate the commercial proposition of small reactors in the emerging nuclear market. The group will be asked to report in the spring.

Subject to further evidence on the commercial viability of advanced nuclear technologies, we will continue to look closely at other market failures which inhibit new reactors competing in our diverse energy markets.

**DEFENCE**

**Correction**

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): I wish to inform the House that an error has been identified in the answer I gave to the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) in Defence oral questions on 27 November 2017, Official Report, column 21, on the subject of funding defence nuclear capabilities.

To clarify, the UK’s nuclear deterrent has always been funded from the Defence budget.

**ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS**

**Agriculture and Fisheries Pre-Council Statement**

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): The Agriculture and Fisheries Council will take place on December 11-12 in Brussels.

As the provisional agenda stands, the primary focus for fisheries will be reaching a political agreement on Atlantic and North Sea total allowable catches and quotas for 2018.

The primary focus for agriculture will be a presentation from the European Commission on “The Future of Food and Farming”.

There are currently five items scheduled under “any other business”:

- **implementation of the landing obligation, choke species risk in January 2019**
- **outcome of the conference on “Modern Biotechnologies in Agriculture: Paving the way for responsible innovation”**
- **outcome of the high-level conference on African swine fever (ASF) (Prague, 8-9 November 2017)**
- **tackling unfair trading practices with an aim to achieve a more balanced food supply chain and strengthen the farmer’s position**
On 23 June 2016, the EU referendum took place and the people of the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union. Until exit negotiations are concluded, the UK remains a full member of the European Union and all the rights and obligations of EU membership remain in force. During this period the Government will continue to negotiate, implement and apply EU legislation. The outcome of these negotiations will determine what arrangements apply in relation to EU legislation in future once the UK has left the EU.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): I will attend the Foreign Affairs Council (Foreign and Development Ministers) on 11 December. The Foreign Affairs Council will be chaired by the High Representative (HRVP) of the European Union (EU) for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini. The meeting will be held in Brussels.

The agenda for the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) is expected to include Iraq, the middle east; as well as the Democratic Republic of Congo under any other business. There will be a lunch focused on the G5 Sahel joint force and a joint FAC and FAC (development) session on the recent European Union-African Union (AU-EU) summit. There will be a short FAC (development) in the afternoon.

The HRVP is expected to open the meeting with introductory remarks on the Eastern Partnership summit, permanent structured co-operation (PESCO), Libya, Zimbabwe and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK).

Iraq

Ministers will discuss the situation in Iraq, including winning the peace post-Daesh and managing recent tensions between Baghdad and the Kurdish region. The EEAS will provide an update on the EU Iraq strategy that is due to be released in January. We will underline the need to continue de-escalating tensions between Baghdad and Erbil, ensuring that all parties focus on the fight against Daesh, preventing its re-emergence and working together to build a more stable, prosperous and inclusive future for all of Iraq’s people, including Iraqi Kurds.

Middle east

Ministers will discuss developments in the middle east. We continue to be concerned by the humanitarian situation in Yemen and continued restrictions on commercial and humanitarian supplies entering Yemen while understanding Saudi Arabia’s legitimate security concerns. The Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary have both engaged on this pressing matter. We are also concerned by the recent developments in Yemen which underline the need for a comprehensive political solution. We will encourage European partners to work with us to find solutions.

G5 Sahel joint force

Ministers will meet representatives of countries which have stood up the G5 Sahel joint force—Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Chad.

EU-Africa

Ministers will discuss the outcomes of the EU-AU summit and follow-up to the conclusions the summit adopted on 30 November. The UK will note the opportunity that Zimbabwe has to embrace a free and democratic future. We have shared, with EU and Five Eyes partners, our expectations for the new Government in order for the international community to re-engage and provide support: free and fair elections, economic and political reform, commitment to human rights and a clear message that Zimbabwe is open to international trade and investment.

FAC (development)

Development Ministers will discuss next steps on aid for trade following the publication of the European Commission’s communication on “Achieving Prosperity through Trade and Investment: Updating the 2007 Joint EU Strategy on Aid for Trade”. This discussion will focus on how EU co-operation can help developing economies take better advantage of trade opportunities as a means to finance their own way out of poverty.

The FAC is also expected to adopt conclusions on Thailand and the Democratic Republic of Congo. It hopes to adopt the Council decision launching PESCO and identify initial PESCO projects.

HEALTH

Paterson Case

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): Ian Paterson, a consultant breast surgeon who was employed by the Heart of England NHS Foundation Trust (HEFT), and had practising privileges in the independent sector at Spire Parkway and Spire Little Aston, was found guilty in April this year of 17 counts of wounding with intent. He was sentenced to jail for 20 years.

The Government are appalled by the actions of Ian Paterson and the harm that has affected a significant number of patients. The disclosures about the seriousness and extent of his malpractice are deeply and profoundly shocking.

The Government committed to ensuring lessons were learnt in the interest of patient protection and safety, both in the independent sector and the NHS.

Today, I am announcing the establishment of an independent, non-statutory inquiry into the circumstances and practices surrounding Ian Paterson that have affected so many patients. I have asked the Right Revd Graham James, Bishop of Norwich to chair the inquiry.

The inquiry should be informed by the victims of Paterson and families’ concerns, and seek to learn from their experience. Therefore, the inquiry will look at the local care and treatment for private patients in the Solihull area, and review current and past practices to
establish if safeguards for patients treated at independent healthcare providers have fallen short of the standards the public have a right to expect. This will help to inform the broader lessons applicable to care provided by the independent healthcare sector across the country.

The inquiry is likely to consider issues including, but not limited to:

- the responsibility for the quality of care in the independent sector; appraisal, revalidation and multi-disciplinary working in the independent sector;
- information sharing, reporting of activity and raising concerns between the independent sector and the NHS;
- and the role of insurers of independent sector providers (including sharing of data), and arrangements for medical indemnity cover for clinicians in the independent sector.

The inquiry will also draw on issues raised in previous relevant reports about Paterson.

It is not intended to revisit the evidence that we already have about Paterson and that led to his conviction.

The terms of reference and other arrangements relating to the inquiry will be published in due course after a period of engagement.

The inquiry will be formally established from January 2018 and will report in summer 2019.

I am confident that Bishop Graham will oversee a thorough and independent non-statutory inquiry and deliver his recommendations swiftly. [HCWS323]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Changes in Immigration Rules

The Minister for Immigration (Brandon Lewis): The Secretary of State for the Home Department is today laying before the House a statement of changes in immigration rules, copies of which will be available in the Vote Office.

The offer the UK makes to highly skilled international leaders in science, research digital technology and the arts is being enhanced by doubling the number of tier 1 (exceptional talent) places to 2,000 visas per year.

As announced in the autumn Budget, and to support our ambitions on innovation and research and development, the changes also include provisions to enable internationally recognised global leaders in science, as well as those in digital technology, and the arts and creative sectors, endorsed under the tier 1 (exceptional talent) route, to apply for settlement after three years, amend tier 2 rules to allow for faster switching for tier 4 students below PhD level, while also making it easier to employ international researchers and members of established research teams by relaxing the labour market test under tier 2. The changes also provide for additional flexibility within our settlement rules to enable scientists and researchers who are called to assist with humanitarian and environmental crises to be absent from the UK for more than 180 days, if required.

The changes make other amendments to the settlement rules for work routes, for consistency. These relate to the 180-day absence provision, breaks in employment, time spent in the Crown dependencies, and the calculation of the qualifying period.

The rules for entrepreneurs are being simplified following customer feedback, to make them clearer and easier to follow (the requirements themselves are largely unchanged).

We continue to improve and modernise the UK’s border and immigration system, which will now include moves toward further digitisation. These changes are required to facilitate the planned move toward introducing immigration permissions issued in electronic form. This will also allow trials to be undertaken that will test the operation of any new system. The rules are also being changed to permit holders of standard visit visas to transit the UK rather than having to get a different type of visa. This builds on the work, begun in April 2015, to simplify the immigration rules for visitors. [HCWS327]

National Transfer Scheme

The Minister for Immigration (Brandon Lewis): The Government remain committed to helping and supporting children in need of international protection. In the year ending September 2017, the UK granted asylum or another form of leave to almost 9,000 children and nearly 49,000 children since 2010. Last month, we published a safeguarding strategy which sets out our vision and commitment to caring for and supporting unaccompanied asylum-seeking and refugee children. We look forward to working with partners to implement the actions in that strategy.

We have seen a significant increase in the number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in the UK in recent years and this has placed pressure on a small number of local authorities; particularly those such as Kent and Croydon. On 1 July 2016, the Government launched the National Transfer Scheme (NTS) for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. The NTS is a voluntary scheme that supports local authorities to transfer responsibility for unaccompanied children who are already in the UK to another local authority. The scheme seeks to achieve a fairer allocation of caring responsibilities across the country so that all children get the care and support they need.

The NTS has made significant progress. As at 1 October 2017, the scheme had transferred 555 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children to other local authorities. The Government are very grateful for the way that participating local authorities have volunteered to care for unaccompanied children through the NTS. However, it is clear that there is more to do to ensure that no local authority is asked to look after more children than its local services can cope with and that the children receive the right level of care. There are approximately 4,500 unaccompanied asylum-seeking and refugee children in local authority care in England and a small number of local authorities continue to look after a disproportionately high number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

The NTS is underpinned by provisions in the Immigration Act 2016. However, these provisions currently only apply to English local authorities, which makes it difficult for the other nations of the UK to participate.

I am pleased to be able to announce that the Government are introducing secondary legislation to extend the NTS to the whole of the United Kingdom. The statutory instrument provides a legislative base for transfer
arrangements in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. This will allow the relevant authorities in each nation of the UK to participate in the NTS and ensure it is a truly national scheme. The NTS is voluntary and participation will remain a decision for each respective authority. We are committed to working closely with relevant authorities and partners to ensure the NTS takes account of the unique circumstances in each nation of the UK. However, we hope that by introducing this statutory instrument, we will encourage more local authorities to step forward and volunteer to support these children.

[HCWS326]

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Tailored Review of ICAI

The Secretary of State for International Development (Penny Mordaunt): I am today publishing a mandated review of the Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI), in accordance with my responsibility as the Minister accountable to Parliament for it. In line with standard Cabinet Office guidance the review examined the case for ICAI to exist and assessed its efficiency and governance arrangements.

In recognition of ICAI’s role as a scrutiny body, an independent challenge panel was appointed to ensure the objectivity and impartiality of the review process, and included members of the National Audit Office and Institute for Government. The Cabinet Office was satisfied that the review demonstrated an appropriate level of independence. The review acknowledges the importance of ICAI’s independence and its recommendations have been formulated to ensure this is preserved. The review gathered evidence from a wide range of stakeholders, drawn from Parliament, Government, the wider development sector and ICAI itself.

The review concluded that ICAI is necessary and that it should continue to be delivered by ICAI in its current form as a non-departmental public body with advisory functions. ICAI’s functions are of particular importance given the statutory obligation for independent evaluation of the impact and value for money of aid arising from the 2015 International Development (Official Development Assistance Target) Act.

The review found that ICAI’s work has contributed to increasing the impact and value for money of UK aid, and that ICAI is appreciated across the development sector for its scrutiny of aid impact. The review made a number of recommendations for further improving ICAI’s effectiveness, including by developing improved measures of its own performance and by adopting a more consultative approach to developing recommendations that will increase their value.

Though the review found that ICAI should continue in its current form, it recommended changes to its delivery model to improve both its efficiency and effectiveness, including making its Chief Commissioner full-time. The review also assessed ICAI’s governance arrangements and found them to be largely in-line with best practice for public bodies.

I am grateful to all those who contributed to the review, which will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and is available online at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/tailored-review-of-the-independent-commission-for-aid-impact-icai.

[HCWS325]
Petition

Tuesday 28 November 2017

OBSERVATIONS

TRANSPORT

South Western Railway

The Humble Petition of people of North East Hampshire,

Sheweth that urgent action must be taken concerning the South Western Railway and the change of their timetable coming into force in December 2018; further that this line is particularly highly valued, especially the Fleet, Hook and Winchfield stations; further that if any morning peak-period services are removed this will be detrimental to commuters and is clearly not in the best interests of our community; and further that these proposals need not and must not be implemented, as demonstrated by their ability to provide good Hook and Winchfield services during evening peak-period.

Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your Honourable House urges HM Government to take all possible steps to urge South Western Railway to reconsider the decision to make their proposed changes to the train timetable due to come into force in December 2018 and to make sure that the train timetable considers the economic, social and familial implications to commuters across North East Hampshire.

And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray, & c.—[Presented by Mr Ranil Jayawardena. Official Report, 7 November 2017; Vol. 630, c. 1438.]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard):

South Western Railway (SWR) is currently consulting on the major timetable changes planned for December 2018 which will be the first of two significant timetable changes contemplated under the new Franchise agreement. This reflects the train service specification that has been contracted following the receipt and evaluation of the bids for the Franchise.

SWR launched the consultation on 29 September and it will run until 22 December—a copy of which can be found on its website at: https://www.southwestrailway.com/contact-and-help/timetable-consultation

SWR will then have around three months to finalise the timetable before it is bid to Network Rail in March 2018.

Both the Department and SWR recognise the concerns raised from the people of North Hampshire and due consideration is being given to these.

However, I must stress that this is still a live consultation and no decision has been made yet. SWR is proactively providing initial responses to comments that are being made alongside the consultation documents on its website and it continues to welcome the views of passengers and stakeholders alike. This feedback will be used to shape the final timetable that provides the best levels of service for the maximum number of people who wish to use SWR’s services on what promises to be an exciting future on the franchise which will deliver £1.2 billion worth of investment over its seven year life span.
Petition

Thursday 30 November 2017

OBSERVATIONS

TRANSPORT

Parking around Linton Avenue

The petition of residents of Solihull,

Declares that there is a problem with parking around Linton Avenue and that it is necessary for parking restrictions to be put in place.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council provide restricted parking between 09:00 - 11:00 to 14:00 15:00 on Monday to Friday around Linton Avenue.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Julian Knight, Official Report, 25 October 2017; Vol. 630, c. 3P]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman):

The Department for Transport is responsible for setting legislation and for guidance to traffic authorities on how to provide various traffic management measures. Local authorities have a statutory responsibility to provide appropriate traffic management schemes for their roads (under section 122 of the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984).

They are free to make their own decisions about the streets under their care, provided they take account of the relevant legislation. They are also accountable to local people for their decisions and their performance. It is entirely a matter for individual authorities, in this case Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council, to decide on the nature and scope of parking policies and to balance the needs of residents, emergency services, local business and those who work in and visit the areas.

Local authorities can use their traffic management powers under the Road Traffic Regulation Act (RTRA) 1984 to make traffic regulation orders (TROs) to introduce traffic management measures such as residential parking schemes or other parking charges to balance the supply and demand for road space in the light of local needs.

They may impose parking restrictions over wide areas, or confine them to particular streets or parts of streets. They may prohibit parking altogether, or restrict it to particular times. They may also apply restrictions to all vehicles or just to specific classes (such as width or height) of vehicle, or to the vehicles of residents only.

Ministers and officials have no remit to intervene in the day-to-day affairs of local authorities except where specific provision has been made in legislation. All requests for parking restrictions should be made direct to the Council.
Petitions

Monday 4 December 2017

OBSERVATIONS

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Consumer Rights

The petition of residents of Linlithgow and East Falkirk,

Declarations that the Consumer Rights Act of 2015 does not do enough to protect consumers against rogue traders who do not comply with the terms of the Act; further that the change to the Act in 2015, which gives consumers the right to reject goods within 30 days, which are not as described or faulty, is unenforceable; and further that currently, consumers cannot take any action against companies who do not participate in the Consumer Ombudsman scheme, and this leaves the consumer with the laborious task, if the company will not co-operate, of having to take a small claims action in court.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to review the Consumer Rights Act (2015) to ensure better protection for consumers; further asks the Government to review the terms of the Act, to make membership of a professional body for traders compulsory; and further that this action would allow consumers the ability to pursue a complaint with the Consumer Ombudsman.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Martyn Day, Official Report, 11 October 2017; Vol. 629, c. 411.]/[P002063]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James):

The Government determine the environment within which markets operate so as to drive effective competition. This includes the rules which govern consumer rights and how to enforce them; and the rules with which business must comply in order to sell to consumers. This framework ensures consumer confidence in markets and reassures businesses that they are competing on a level playing field.

The Consumer Rights Act 2015 (CRA) sets out a framework that consolidates in one place key consumer rights covering contracts for goods, services, digital content and the law relating to unfair terms in consumer contracts. In addition, the Act introduces easier routes for consumers and small and medium sized enterprises ("SMEs") to challenge anti-competitive behaviour through the Competition Appeals Tribunal ("CAT"). The CRA also consolidates enforcers’ powers to investigate potential breaches of consumer law and clarifies that certain enforcers (Trading Standards) can operate across local authority boundaries. It gives the civil courts and public enforcers greater flexibility to take the most appropriate action for consumers when dealing with breaches or potential breaches of consumer law.

Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) is a well-established process that enables disputes between a consumer and business to be settled via an independent and impartial body without recourse to the court system. In many sectors, if a consumer has a complaint and is not satisfied with the company’s response to it, they can go to an ombudsman or other alternative dispute resolution (ADR) provider. ADR gives consumers and businesses a quicker, cheaper way to resolve disputes than going to court. This can empower consumers and business alike, raising standards and giving confidence to both sides that problems can be dealt with quickly, effectively and amicably.

Consumers have a right to take a dispute to ADR in the finance, energy, telecoms, estate agents and legal services sectors. In other sectors, there is no mandatory requirement to use ADR although it is available for any dispute should the business decide they want to use it.

It is important that consumer protections are kept under regular review and the Government will issue a Consumer Green Paper that will closely examine markets especially those which are not working fairly for consumers.

Respondents to the green paper will be able to present evidence regarding the effectiveness of consumer redress mechanisms including the role of ombudsmen and ADR provision.

HOME DEPARTMENT

System of obtaining Permanent Residence Certification

The petition of residents of the UK,

Declarations that the current system of PR discriminates against many groups of EU/EEA residents and their non-EEA spouses/civil partners; further that this reform will facilitate EU/EEA nationals to obtain Permanent Resident Certification/Card (PR), currently mandatory to become UK citizens (for those who wish to do so).

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that British spouses/civil partners to be considered as sponsors or their EU/EEA spouses/civil partners in PR applications; further to scrap Comprehensive Sickness Insurance as PR requirement for EU/EEA students, homemakers, carers, retired and disabled people or applicants self-sufficient through other income, including their non-EEA spouses/civil partners; EU/EEA nationals, their spouses/civil partners, their children, who have exercised treaty rights for less than five years, to complete their journey to PR; further that parents/carers of British citizens to obtain PR automatically; further that spouses/civil partners of UK service men/women to acquire PR without proof of residency; further that PR to be protected under UK law; further that type of residency evidence, currently accepted for PR/ILR, to be accepted for UK citizenship; further that leaders are urged to act now to reform the system of obtaining Permanent Residence Certification/Card (PR).

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Tommy Sheppard, Official Report, 12 September 2017; Vol. 628, c. 811.]/[P002051]

Observations from the Minister for Immigration (Brandon Lewis):

The right of ‘permanent residence’, and the requirements that need to be met to acquire it, originate from Directive 2004/38/EC (‘the Free Movement Directive’). EU citizens are not required to apply to the Home Office for documentation confirming their status or their right to be here, although it remains open for them to do so if they wish.
EU citizens automatically acquire ‘permanent residence’ status if they have lived in the UK for a continuous period of five years in accordance with the Directive—for example, by exercising Treaty rights as a worker, self-employed person, student, or self-sufficient person or by residing as the family member of an EU national exercising Treaty rights. ‘Permanent residence’ status is linked to the UK’s membership of the EU and will no longer be valid after the UK leaves.

The current Free Movement Directive requires those who wish to rely on periods of residence as a student or self-sufficient person in order to acquire ‘permanent residence’ to have held comprehensive sickness insurance for the relevant qualifying periods. This is because the Directive requires that self-sufficient people and students are not a burden on the social assistance system of the host member state.

The Government have set out in their policy document, published on 26 June and available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/safeguarding-the-position-of-eu-citizens-in-the-uk-and-uk-nationals-in-the-eu, its intention to create new rights in UK law for qualifying EU citizens resident here before our exit. Those rights will be enforceable through the UK legal system and will provide legal guarantees for these EU citizens and their family members. To qualify, the EU citizen must have been lawfully resident in the UK before a specified date and must have completed a period of five years’ continuous residence in the UK before they apply for settled status, at which point they must still be resident. Those who are resident on the specified date, but do not qualify for settled status before we leave the EU will be able to stay after exit and to accrue the five years’ residence needed for settled status.

Under the new scheme, we will not require anyone to demonstrate they have held comprehensive sickness insurance. We intend to create a new application process for UK settled status, which will be as simple and user-friendly as possible. On citizens’ rights we want to reach agreement as soon as we can, providing certainty for citizens. We will set out further details in due course.
Petition

Thursday 7 December 2017

OBSERVATIONS

TRANSPORT

Users of the No. 67 Bus Service in Torbay

The petition of users of the No.67 bus service in Torbay,
Declares that the cancellation of the number 67 bus service between Brixham, Marldon, Torbay Hospital and the Willows will have a detrimental impact on local residents, in particular, elderly residents.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges Torbay Council to commit to providing a similar service to the previous No.67 service for sake of the local residents as soon as possible.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Dr Sarah Wollaston, Official Report, 7 November 2017; Vol. 630, c. 1437.]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman):

I recognise the importance of public transport for both the sustainability and independence of communities. Inadequate transport provision is a very real concern and can be a barrier to the prosperity of all.

Where there is not enough demand for a bus route to be commercially viable in its own right, all local authorities in England have powers to subsidise bus services which they consider socially necessary.

Decisions on subsidised bus services are a matter for individual English local authorities, in the light of their other spending priorities. The Government fully appreciate that local authorities are making difficult choices as a result of ongoing financial pressures.

The majority of public funding for local bus services is via block grant provided to local authorities in England from the Department for Communities and Local Government. However, my Department also provides around £40 million of Bus Service Operators Grant funding directly to English local authorities to help deliver bus services, of which Torbay Council receives around £24,000. Councils can use this money to support bus services in whatever way they see fit.

The Bus Services Act 2017 introduces a number of new tools to help local authorities improve local bus services in their area. Through partnership arrangements, we have enabled local authorities and bus operators to work constructively to provide better services for passengers.

I would strongly encourage local authorities and bus operators to work together, in consultation with local residents and businesses, to identify transport solutions that meet the economic and environmental challenges faced in the area and deliver the greatest benefits for the community.
Ministerial Corrections

Monday 27 November 2017

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Budget Resolutions

The following is an extract from the speech by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government in the second day of debate on the Budget Resolutions on 23 November 2017.

Ms Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): I am a nurse and I still do bank shifts at Lincoln County Hospital, and I am sorry but I really do not recognise what the Secretary of State is describing. Hospitals have got leaking roofs, with buckets to catch the water coming in, and nurses leave shifts at least an hour late, while our pay has been capped and we have lost 14% since 2010. I am sorry, but I do not recognise the NHS he is talking about.

Sajid Javid: I say gently to the hon. Lady that if this country had taken Labour’s approach to the economy, we would be heading for bankruptcy again, and there would be no new money for the NHS. I hope that she will join Members on both sides of the House in welcoming the additional £2.8 billion going to the NHS in resource spending next year and the additional £3.5 billion that has been made available for capital spending over the next five years.


Letter of correction from Sajid Javid:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the intervention of the hon. Member for Lincoln (Ms Lee).

The correct response should have been:

Sajid Javid: I say gently to the hon. Lady that if this country had taken Labour’s approach to the economy, we would be heading for bankruptcy again, and there would be no new money for the NHS. I hope that she will join Members on both sides of the House in welcoming the additional £2.8 billion going to the NHS in resource spending and the additional £3.5 billion that has been made available for capital spending over the next five years.

TREASURY

HMRC Closures

The following are extracts from a speech by the Financial Secretary to the Treasury in a debate on HMRC Closures on 2 November 2017.

Mel Stride: A number of Members in the debate raised the costs mentioned in the National Audit Office report, the Public Accounts Committee report and so on. Certainly, the business plan has gone through various iterations, but where we are is quite clear: the total investment over the next 10 years will be £552 million. The NAO has disputed some of our figures, and the Government’s view is that the NAO has looked at those figures on a different basis—for example, over a 10-year period, whereas we were initially looking at figures over five years.

We have some cost avoidance of £75 million per annum from 2021 through getting out of the private finance initiative arrangement—which, incidentally, we entered into in 2001, which was of course under a Labour Government. On top of that, we will have £300 million-worth of savings over the next 10 years, and we will have annual cost savings of £74 million in 2025-26 compared with 2015-16, rising to around £90 million from 2026-27. The savings are ongoing and will be long standing.


Mel Stride: The cost savings are for an investment of £552 million over 10 years. Firstly, they arise through the avoidance of future costs that would be incurred in the event of our not going ahead with the programme. Those would be the costs of the PFI deal, were we to continue with it. That cost is £75 million per annum—obviously from 2021, when the contract for strategic transfer of the estate to the private sector comes to an end. There is a cost saving of £300 million in the 10 years to 2025. That gives an annual cash saving, as compared with 2016-17, of £74 million in 2025-26, rising to about £90 million in 2026-27.


Letter of correction from Mel Stride:

Errors have been identified in my response to the debate.

The correct statements should have been:

Mel Stride: A number of Members in the debate raised the costs mentioned in the National Audit Office report, the Public Accounts Committee report and so on. Certainly, the business plan has gone through various iterations, but where we are is quite clear: the total investment over the next 10 years will be £552 million. The NAO has disputed some of our figures, and the Government’s view is that the NAO has looked at those figures on a different basis—for example, over a 10-year period, whereas we were initially looking at figures over five years.

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Mel Stride: The cost savings are for an investment of £552 million over 10 years. Firstly, they arise through the avoidance of future costs that would be incurred in the event of our not going ahead with the programme. Those would be the costs of the PFI deal, were we to continue with it. That cost is £75 million per annum—obviously from 2021, when the contract for strategic transfer of the estate to the private sector comes to an end. There is a cost saving of £300 million in the 10 years to 2025. That gives an annual cash saving, as compared with 2016-17, of £74 million in 2025-26, rising to about £90 million in 2028.
Ministerial Correction

Monday 4 December 2017

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Topical Questions

The following is an extract from Topical Questions to the Secretary of State for International Development on 29 November 2017.

T5. [902651] Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): The House will be aware that this Friday marks World AIDS Day. Will the Minister tell us what the Department is going to do to build on this country's expertise and investment to date to ensure that critical AIDS vaccines are delivered to Africa?

Alistair Burt: I am pleased to join the hon. Gentleman, and I am sure the whole House, in commemorating World AIDS Day. We have been a long-term supporter of the international AIDS vaccine initiative, and we are the largest international funder of HIV prevention, care and treatment. From the £1.1 billion going into the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, 1.3 million retroviral drugs will be provided through the UK this year. There will be no let-up in the fight, and we are united on that.


Letter of correction from Alistair Burt:

An error has been identified in the answer I gave to the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield).

The correct answer should have been:

Alistair Burt: I am pleased to join the hon. Gentleman, and I am sure the whole House, in commemorating World AIDS Day. We have been a long-term supporter of the international AIDS vaccine initiative, and we are the second largest international funder of HIV prevention, care and treatment. From the £1.1 billion going into the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, 1.3 million retroviral drugs will be provided through the UK this year. There will be no let-up in the fight, and we are united on that.
Ministerial Correction

Tuesday 5 December 2017

DEFENCE

Cadet Units: State Schools

The following is an extract from Questions to the Secretary of State for Defence on 27 November 2017.

Sir David Amess: Given the findings of the recently published report by my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), does my hon. Friend agree that schemes such as the combined cadet force at Westcliff High School for Boys are an excellent way to boost recruitment in the armed forces? Perhaps he will also encourage other schools to adopt the programme.

Mr Ellwood: I also pay tribute to my right hon. Friend’s work on understanding the challenges we face with recruitment and retention. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that, as a starting point, the cadet programme is important to encourage and open up opportunities in the armed forces. Some 20% of those who sign up for the cadets go on to become members of our armed forces, and the other 80% have an affinity and an understanding for them, and a desire to support them, which is also welcome.


Letter of correction from Mr Ellwood:

An error has been identified in the response that I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) during Questions to the Secretary of State for Defence.

The correct response should have been:

Mr Ellwood: I also pay tribute to my right hon. Friend’s work on understanding the challenges we face with recruitment and retention. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that, as a starting point, the cadet programme is important to encourage and open up opportunities in the armed forces. Some of those who sign up for the cadets go on to become members of our armed forces, and many others have an affinity and an understanding for them, and a desire to support them, which is also welcome.
Ministerial Correction

Thursday 7 December 2017

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Fly-Tipping in Rural Areas

The following is an extract from the response to a debate on fly-tipping in rural areas on 21 November 2017.

Dr Coffey: It is the role of my Department to make sure local authorities have a full range of powers and tools to enable them to tackle fly-tipping, but it is the responsibility of local councils to use all the powers and tools available to them. Last year we gave councils in England the power to issue fixed penalty notices for small-scale fly-tipping. More than 56,000 such notices were issued against fly-tippers last year, and more than half of all local authorities have implemented the new fixed penalty notices since they were introduced in May 2016. [Official Report, 21 November 2017, Vol. 631, c. 1023.]

Letter of correction from Dr Thérèse Coffey.

An error has been identified in my response to the Adjournment debate secured by the hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris).

The correct response should have been:

Dr Coffey: It is the role of my Department to make sure local authorities have a full range of powers and tools to enable them to tackle fly-tipping, but it is the responsibility of local councils to use all the powers and tools available to them. Last year we gave councils in England the power to issue fixed penalty notices for small-scale fly-tipping. More than 56,000 fixed penalty notices were issued against fly-tippers last year, and more than half of all local authorities have implemented the new fixed penalty notices since they were introduced in May 2016.